Prompt the future:

# Humans at the heart of education





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All polling figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The surveys were carried out online.

Total sample sizes were 1,007 adults in the UAE, 1,084 adults in Kenya and 1,043 adults in urban India. Fieldwork was undertaken between 26 August and 2 September 2025. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in the UAE, an online sample of adults in Kenya and all adults in urban India. Adults are individuals aged 18+. For full details of our polling, please visit cambridge.org/prompt-the-future

#### Introduction

#### What does the future look like for learners — and what can education systems do to support them?

As Al tops agendas across schools, businesses and governments worldwide, it might look like the answer. After all, we already know that Al advances innovation and healthcare, and gives users access to a wealth of information in seconds. In education too, it can lower teacher workload, personalise learning pathways and improve accessibility. But is an Al-first focus overshadowing a bigger opportunity?

The greatest possibilities for education systems lie not in technology alone, but in what humans and technology can achieve together. The human part of the equation can be easy to overlook in the face of rapid innovation when, in fact, it should be our compass to navigate change.

66 It is people — not machines — who determine which technologies thrive, how they are used and whom they serve. Al's impact will be defined not by what it can do, but by the decisions we make in its design, development and deployment."

Human Development Report 2025, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  $^{\scriptscriptstyle 1}$ 

How do we reorient education systems to turn these possibilities into progress? To start that conversation, we have a proposition: For the next generation to thrive, we must equip learners with both digital skills and the deeply human capabilities that fuel resilient economies and societies.

We believe nations that embed these into the heart of education reform will progress at pace — reaping the benefits of emerging technology and seeing students reach their potential.





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#### "To get to the heart of education challenges, listen to the people at the heart of education."

To put this into action, we have three top priorities for governments to consider now to prepare learners for the decades ahead:

#### Priority one

Focus on education that builds the whole person.

If AI can replace us, then we're not teaching the right things.

Education must go beyond traditional test scores to develop the knowledge, skills, values and resilience that drive future economic growth, global engagement and flourishing societies.

Al struggles to capture and understand the nuance of the languages, connections and context that make us uniquely human. Let's make sure our education systems reflect them.

#### Priority two

Build change with people across the system.

To get to the heart of education challenges, listen to the people at the heart of education.

The best solutions emerge when governments, teachers, learners, families, employers and communities work together.

#### **Priority three**

Equip teachers to be agents of change.

Great teachers prepare learners to meet tomorrow's challenges and shape a better world. It's vital that we prioritise them.

Technology should empower teachers, not replace them. It should make their lives in the classroom easier and free up their time to focus on hard-to-teach human skills, like creativity and critical thinking.

#### What do you think? Prompt the future

This report is the beginning of a conversation and we need your ideas.

Over the coming months, we'll pose big questions to prompt global thinking around the role of AI and other technology in our classrooms. And we'll explore what it looks like to nurture uniquely human strengths across education systems.

To join the conversation, head to cambridge.org/prompt-the-future to respond to our current prompts and pose questions of your own.

We're starting with three questions:

- > Q1. What do you think the next generation needs to thrive and why?
- > Q2. Who needs to be more involved in policy in your education system and what would effectively engaging them look like?
- > Q3. What's the most important thing we lose without enough well-trained teachers in classrooms?

We'll gather ideas and share them with you. Together, we can build societies that are digitally fluent *and* deeply human: resilient, adaptable and ready for the future.

#### Where do our insights come from?

This report builds on our experience working with national education systems in over 40 countries. It further draws on insights from recent research² with almost 7,000 teachers and learners across the international education sector, which was supported by conversations with around 50 global experts.

We have also started to gauge public opinion on key questions in a selection of the countries we work in.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (2025). Preparing learners to thrive in a changing world. cambridge.org/future-ready-learners

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Priority one

# Focus on education that builds the whole person



How can nations develop education systems that reflect the full spectrum of human intelligence?

By focusing on how we think, learn, approach ethics and connect with each other.

66 AI uses patterns in text. Humans use memories stored in muscle, skin and bone. Experience leaves traces even the best pattern-matching cannot fabricate."

Professor Rose Luckin, Founder & CEO, Educate Ventures Research

Humans and machines have different strengths.

Al is a statistical pattern engine. It handles huge volumes of information effortlessly and excels at routine. But when it comes to making ethical decisions or facing ambiguity, Al struggles. These limits aren't temporary technical problems but fundamental characteristics of how Al systems work.

Humans on the other hand respond, adapt, reflect and resist. In fact, those are some of the core human qualities that Cambridge's DeepMind Professor Neil Lawrence says make up the essence of 'the atomic human'3. Right now, most education systems don't do enough to nurture our atomic human traits. The added challenge as we move forward is ensuring that AI supports our thinking rather than replaces it. If we start offloading tasks inappropriately, we could become less capable overall. Instead, if we can design education systems that combine the best of human and technological skill, we can unlock our potential. To do it, we'll need to work together.

Strong national foundations are the roots for global collaboration

Most AI models produce uniformity by design. They work by predicting next steps in a sequence. This can be great for spotting and stopping fraud, predicting demand peaks in supply chains or even recognising someone's risk of a disease returning. But human strengths aren't uniform. It's our differences that make us stronger and help societies address complex challenges together.

Evidence shows children learn best when education is highly relevant, too. It's one of the reasons strong education systems start locally.

Most national strategies prioritise what matters most to their people. They are shaped by local identity, cultural values and social priorities. These strategies reflect a country's history and traditions, but also their aspirations for the future. Aligning education with national visions supports economic growth and strengthens communities.

Taking a national approach gives learners a firm foundation to interpret issues clearly, build trust and contribute original perspectives. It helps students form their sense of identity and understand their place in the world.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Lawrence, N. (2024). The atomic human: What makes us unique in the age of Al.

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#### "Children learn best when education is highly relevant."

Unsurprisingly, AI is no substitute for the human experience — not least because it's not trained that way. Of the 7,000+ languages spoken globally, a recent study suggests many typical large language models are trained on a very small percentage of them<sup>4</sup>. Less than 5% of people speak English as a first language. Yet another study found around 90% of some models' training data is in English<sup>5</sup>. That automatically builds a bias into the system. Nations should be ready to counteract it by continuing to invest in education that's relevant to their context.

Education systems that celebrate and nurture atomic human skills will drive economic growth and build societies that can thrive while contributing to global progress. But digital skills still have an essential place on curricula.

#### In focus

#### Bhutan



In Bhutan, we're working with the government to create a curriculum centred on local values and international standards.

Two of these key values are tha dam-tshig and ley gyu-drey (integrity and moral responsibility). So, in Economics lessons, learners evaluate the implications of decisions based on equity, sustainability and social justice.

### <sup>4</sup> Xu, Y., Hu, L., Zhao, J., Qiu, Z., Xu, K., Ye, Y., & Gu, H. (2025). A survey on multilingual large language models: Corpora, alignment, and bias. *Frontiers* of *Computer Science*, 19, Article 1911362. Springer.



## "Less than 5% of people speak English as a first language—yet 90% of several AI models' training data is in English."

#### Bring together digital and human strengths to realise national visions

Digital transformation is now central to most national strategies. The World Economic Forum lists AI, big data, cybersecurity and technology literacy among the fastest-growing skills employers look for <sup>6</sup>. Public opinion agrees.

Yet technology changes too fast for one-time learning. So, how do we build digital competence for life? We think it's less about lessons on how to use specific technologies and more about building wider knowledge and skills to help learners use those tools wisely. Learners need to understand the purpose, limits and ethical uses of digital tools.

66 Coming from the industry's perspective, creativity is a critical skill. You need to be doing things differently in every manner in all your jobs. This is impossible if education systems teach the same information in the same way."

Johnny Edward, Partner, Grant Thornton, India

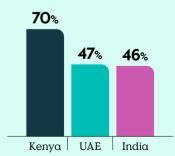
#### Key findings:

In our poll across Kenya, the UAE and urban India, people ranked digital skills as one of the most important skills for the next generation:



Percentage of people who ranked digital skills as the most important skill for the next generation.

Seven in ten Kenyan adults (70%) believe AI and automation is a top challenge for education to prepare the next generation for education. In the UAE, 47% agree. In urban India, 46% do:



Percentage of adults who say preparing for AI and automation is a top challenge for education.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Li, Z., Shi, Y., Liu, Z., Yang, F., Liu, N., & Du, M. (2024). Quantifying multilingual performance of large language models across languages. arXiv Preprint, arXiv:2404.11553.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> World Economic Forum. (2025). The Future of Jobs Report 2025.

#### "Self-management remains essential —and is among the hardest subjects to teach and learn"

#### Skills vs knowledge? We need both

When AI puts so much data at our fingertips, it's easy to say we should focus on skills and let technology supply knowledge. But how will learners develop those skills without knowledge? Knowledge lays the foundation for informed thinking, and when combined with skills, it becomes the key to making effective decisions.

66 The acquisition of knowledge and skills is inherently interconnected. The question should not be whether they can or need to be balanced, but rather how best we can design our educational process - curriculum and, most importantly, pedagogy - to help students practise skills alongside the acquisition, application, synthesis and validation of knowledge."

Pradyumna Bhattacharjee, Education Specialist, World Bank

By building skills and knowledge — and values — side by side, we give learners the tools to sharpen their judgements and take accountability. Ethically and practically, it's the right thing to do. And it builds societies where AI might guide our thinking, but people are responsible for the outcome.

Students and teachers already know which skills they think learners need more of. Though every national context is different, our global research<sup>7</sup> found students and teachers share broad priorities for the future. Both value:

- > leadership, management and business skills
- > self-management a set of skills that enable us to recognise and manage our thoughts, feelings and actions
- > communication
- > higher order thinking and research skills.

But there's a challenge. Our research shows that some skills that are often considered most essential for students' futures, especially self-management, are also reported to be difficult to teach and learn. Yet they're crucial to achieving national ambitions and seeing young people unlock their potential.

66 In India, the emphasis has been on developing competencies. This includes higher order thinking skills, such as problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking and communication. Critically, it is not just what you know. It's the ability to use it and overcome challenges that we want to develop."

Professor Sreekanth Yagnamurthy, National Council of Educational Research and Training, India

66 Collaboration is one of the hardest skills and one I don't think humans have mastered. Whether it is internationally between governments, nationally between government departments or within schools."

Nariman Moustafa, Senior Analyst, Open Development and Education, Egypt

#### So, what now?

The possibilities of technology are huge if we can nurture the uniquely human strengths students will need to use it wisely. We urge governments to keep investing in national initiatives that embrace local culture and context, and support learners to build their communication and critical thinking skills.

#### Prompt the future

What do you think the next generation needs to thrive, and why?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (2025). Preparing learners to thrive in a changing world. cambridge.org/future-ready-learners

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Priority two

### Build change with people across the system



"Defining clear learning outcomes from the outset is essential—clarifying the knowledge and skills we want students to develop in each subject. This demands collaboration across policy, leadership, teaching, curriculum and assessment. It's not enough to focus on one element; success depends on an integrated approach."

His Excellency Dr Saeed Aldhaheri, Director, Center for Futures Studies, University of Dubai, UAE

No one can transform education alone. Real, lasting change is only possible when we work with, not just for, people across the education system.

#### Involve people across the education system in policy

People in the education system are closest to the reality of what goes on. Introducing feedback mechanisms for all key groups early, before, during and after implementing change, is vital. It builds support, considers different perspectives and reduces resistance. It also saves time, money and resources.

66 We know what education must confront and design for. With deeper multistakeholder integration and a humanorientated lens, education systems can deliver true transformational impact."

Dr Iwan Syahril, Global Education Advisor and former Director General at the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Indonesia

When we polled people across India, the UAE and Kenya, we saw a strong public appetite for involving more of the people at the heart of education in policy.

It's an approach that's already working around the world. Finland consults teachers, parents and students before launching any reform through advisory boards, working groups and public consultations. Feedback continues throughout implementation. The result is higher trust, stronger outcomes and more inclusive practices<sup>8</sup>.

Ireland has built a 'talking culture' since the 1980s — bringing teacher unions, government, researchers and church representatives together to shape reforms. This approach balances national traditions with today's challenges.

66 We host events across the country to hear from the people who work in education in order to understand how they're using the ICT in Education policy and what the policy should look like. At one event, only one person had heard of the policy so far in a room of about 200, and no one had read it yet. Consultation is essential to turn policy into practice!"

Ciku Mbugua, Kenya Country Manager, EdTech Hub

#### Key findings:

In our poll across Kenya, the UAE and India, people called for students, teachers, parents and guardians to have a significant role in education policy:

Students <b>78</b>	8-82%
Teachers	86-93%
Parents and guardians	85-93%

#### "Lasting change in education begins with clear communication."

#### The power of communication

You can't put human connection at the heart of education transformation without focusing on communication.

Cambridge's Emeritus Professor Colleen McLaughlin saw this when she studied a recent education reform in Singapore.

66 [It was] the emphasis on communicating about the nature and direction of reforms that built a remarkable degree of consensus or support for the various waves of reform. The Singapore reform seemed to gain and keep a lot of support from stakeholders, from parents, from employers and from practitioners. It is not just that the communication was persistent and pervasive, it also permeated the different parts of the education system. The messages were also accessible and appealed to [people's] economic and personal interests."

Excerpt from 'Implementing Educational Reform'9

#### In focus

#### Oman



In Oman, we worked with the Ministry of Education to transform their entire maths and science curriculum for every grade. Schools shifted from the teacher leading the class in a traditional model to putting students at the centre of every activity.

Aligning the curriculum changes with teaching and learning resources, assessment, and teacher professional development helped embed change. But communicating the change with stakeholders across the system was also essential to its success.

This wasn't unique to Singapore. Professor McLaughlin has found time and again that clear communication is a core part of lasting reform. Getting reform right isn't just about telling students, parents and teachers what's happening or even sharing how change will happen. It's explaining why you're reforming that matters.

"Getting education reform right

isn't just about saying what will

happen—it's about explaining why."

66 In several cases there is an underlying message about the power and persuasiveness of expressing the essential purpose of a reform initiative in terms that are connected to key values like national identity, economic survival or individual opportunity."

Professor Colleen McLaughlin, Cambridge University

#### Data governance and ethics

Building change with people across the education system also means engaging them in how technology and data are used. Many Al and digital tools rely on vast amounts of learner data, and that data is valuable, sensitive and powerful. Without transparent and ethical data practices, trust breaks down and reforms falter. Emerging models, such as data trusts, show how responsibility for data can be shared, with oversight that includes teachers, parents and learners themselves.

When communities help shape the rules around data, it strengthens accountability and helps innovation serve the best interests of every student.

#### So, what now?

Engage communities early. Listen deeply. Act on feedback. When reforms are co-created, they are more inclusive, more trusted and much more likely to succeed.

#### Prompt the future

Who needs to be more involved in policy in your education system? What would effectively engaging them look like?



<sup>8</sup> Al-Thani, G. (2024). Comparative analysis of stakeholder integration in education policy making: Case studies of Singapore and Finland. Societies, 14(7), 104. doi.org/10.3390/soc14070104

<sup>9</sup> McLaughlin, C., & Ruby, A. (Eds.). (2021). Implementing educational reform: Cases and challenges (Cambridge Education Research). Cambridge University Press.

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#### Priority three

# Equip teachers to be agents of change



Among all those working together to shape education, it's teachers who stand at the very front line. They translate ambition into reality, every single day.

#### Teachers are the most important factor in student success

University of Melbourne Professor John Hattie, drawing on over 800 studies, found teachers often have twice as much of an impact on student achievement as any other classroom changes<sup>10</sup>.

We frequently see this in our work. For example, in the world's largest refugee camp, Kutupalong in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, learning centres have limited resources. Working with UNICEF and the Rohingya and host communities, we trained teachers, many without formal education. We looked at group work, feedback and homework marking. The impact of training teachers over the past few years is undeniable. On a recent visit, one team member reported seeing one of the best science lessons they'd observed in nearly 30 years of work across dozens of countries.

If education shifts towards human connection and skills like empathy, collaboration and critical thinking, the teacher's role becomes even more vital. Teachers create spaces to foster 'hard to learn' skills. They adapt to local contexts. They become role models.

66 The beauty about our competencybased curriculum (CBC) is if I'm a teacher in Nairobi, I can take the guidelines and adapt them to my reality, and a teacher in rural Turkana can do the same for their context. But it requires motivated, well-equipped teachers."

Ciku Mbugua, Kenya Country Manager, EdTech Hub

Yet, across the world, we don't have enough teachers.

66 The status and working conditions of teachers are getting really difficult. Many feel unprepared to harness the potential of technology and AI and to minimise its risks. They're feeling unempowered. They're not feeling respected. This has led to teacher shortages and attrition."

Borhene Chakroun, Director of the Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems, UNESCO

Improving learning isn't just about having more teachers either. It's about having great teachers. While some systems urgently need to increase teacher numbers, for all systems real progress depends on ensuring every learner is taught by someone skilled, motivated and well-supported. That means policies must invest in continuous professional development and decent working conditions so that growth never comes at the cost of quality.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. Routledge.

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"Set teachers up for success by tailoring AI tools to their needs —not the other way around."

#### Empower teachers with technology

We have opportunities right in front of us to turn this around. When used wisely, technology can:

- Reduce workload. It can automate marking, feedback and lesson planning.
- > Enable professional development. It can provide reflective tools, peer collaboration and access to expertise.
- > Support personalised learning. It can identify gaps, suggest interventions and provide detailed reports to inform teaching.
- > Foster innovation. It can allow teachers to trial new methods and engage in research.

To truly empower teachers, we need to start with our 'intelligence infrastructure': the policies, governance and data practices that we need to implement AI ethically and effectively across education systems. These should be solid foundations that create the conditions for human-AI collaboration that genuinely enhances human capability.

In past centuries, one of the features of the first industrial revolution was 'tinkering'. Because machines were simpler to understand, people could adapt and tailor them for their way of working to reach their goals more easily. Empowering teachers to understand how and when they might use Al could have a similar effect, without some of the risks of top-down directions.

#### In focus

#### Nigeria



Teachers acted as 'orchestra conductors', starting sessions with prompts, mentoring students and leading reflections. The results suggest nearly two years of learning in just six weeks.



"In every country we surveyed, technology and teachers topped the list of what matters most for preparing students for the future."

You can also set teachers up for success by tailoring Al tools to their needs in the first instance, rather than using off-the-shelf models. For example, we've worked with schools in the Maldives to develop Al lesson-planners which integrate local values, community and environmental themes as core learning components. In South Africa, where most teachers rely on mobile phones, we've developed a WhatsApp chatbot to give quick curriculum advice.

#### Technology and teachers: for everyone

The exciting possibilities of bringing teachers and technology together are widely recognised. In our public surveys across Kenya, the UAE and India, technology topped the list of school factors people believe matter most for preparing students for the future. In the UAE and India, teachers came a close second. In Kenya, where there is a shortage of teachers and technology has already benefited sectors like banking, the gap was wider.

Technology can empower teachers, but it can't replace them. Nations that use technology as a substitute for teachers risk creating a two-tier system. One tier where children learn from skilled teachers using technology to enhance learning. Another where children rely on digital platforms with little or no human guidance.

#### **Key findings:**

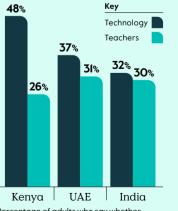
#### 44 million

More teachers are needed worldwide by 2030 to meet UN Sustainable Development Goal targets, UNESCO, 2024

#### 2

The number of primary school teachers globally left the profession in 2022 compared to 2015 (up from 4.6% to 9%).

In our poll across Kenya, the UAE and urban Indian, respondents most frequently selected technology and teachers as the factors at school with the biggest impact on preparing children for the future:



Percentage of adults who say whether technology or teachers matter most for preparing students for the future.

#### "If we want to raise thoughtful, empathetic citizens, they must learn from—and with—real people."

66 I think the main challenge everywhere is understanding that technology by itself is nothing. Technology only works when it helps human beings to be more effective."

Nargiza Kuchkarova, Lead Specialist, Ministry of Preschool and School Education, Uzbekistan. As shared in discussion as part of the HP Cambridge Partnership for Education EdTech Fellowship.

There are also worrying signs that children may treat AI as human. Cambridge research recently found children will disclose more about their mental health to a friendly-looking robot than to an adult. But chatbots have an 'empathy gap' children often miss. They assume the bot will respond like an empathetic human — but it might not. In the short term, those unpredictable responses could put a child's wellbeing at risk. In the long term their development could suffer.

If we want to raise thoughtful, empathetic citizens, they must learn from — and with — real people.

#### Equip teachers with training, time and trust

It's time to empower teachers as agents of change. That means valuing them, recognising teaching as a skilled, complex profession and supporting them with ongoing development. It includes giving teachers training on how to use digital tools, and how to nurture hard-to-teach skills. This training needs to be accessible to all teachers, especially those in rural and under-resourced areas.

66 Really accessible teacher continuous professional development (CPD) means breaking it down into small snippets. Small modules that are continuously available to teachers, on a five-year-old smartphone. CPD modules that cost half a dollar to download and use offline!"

John Kimotho, EdTech Consultant, Spix Foundation

66 Mentoring is key. For young teachers, they are often thrown into the deep end, so having a mentor at this stage could make a big difference. This then allows for new teaching methods, such as project-based learning and interdisciplinary learning."

Tatiana Popa, Deputy Academic Director and Head of Global Education at Heritage International School, Moldova

Clear vision matters, but rigid curricula are less helpful. Teachers need space to use their judgement and creativity.

66 Prescriptive, teacher-proof curricula leave no room for a teacher's skills and strengths to shine. They lead to dull lessons, demoralised teachers and students who'd rather be on their phones than in the classroom."

Professor Emeritus Colleen McLaughlin, Cambridge University

In short, give teachers creative freedom and high support and you'll make the profession both more impactful and more rewarding — helping you hire and retain them too.



#### Investing in teachers pays off

Without investing in teachers, education initiatives are much more likely to fail. Conversely, even modest investments in teachers can have far-reaching impact. For example, India's Zero Investment Innovation in Education Initiatives (ZIIEI) programme gathers micro-innovations from teachers — small, practical changes that cost nothing but creativity. These ideas are scaled through partnerships with over 25 Indian states. When our Cambridge team ran a study<sup>11</sup> evaluating ZIIEI's impact, we found overwhelming evidence of positive socio-educational, organisational and personal results.

#### So, what now?

The message is clear. Our teachers need support, they need agency and they deserve your time. We can't implement new curricula, policy or technology without them. We must listen to what teachers say works and where they need help. We all fail without them.

#### Prompt the future

What's the most important thing we lose without enough well-trained teachers in classrooms?

II Sri Aurobindo Society & Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (2020). Transforming societies through education: Implementing grassroots reform — Zero Investment Innovations in Education Initiatives (ZIIEI) evaluation report.

#### Ready to prompt the future?

Al has filled the future with new possibilities for the next generation. Now it's on all of us to make the most of them.

By working together, we can build thriving, resilient societies that can rise to the challenges of the 21st century and beyond.

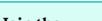
To do it, let's start by putting humans at the heart of our plans:

- > Designing education systems that nurture the whole person
- > Listening to the people inside the systems before we reform them
- > Empowering our teachers to nurture the strengths that make us uniquely human.

#### Join the conversation

discussion, and we need your thoughts. Right now, not enough children are being prepared for the future. Help us forge a path to change that: cambridge.org/ prompt-the-future

partnership@cambridge.org

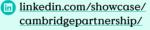


This is the start of a global

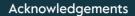
Want to discuss what this means for you with a member of our team? Get in touch:











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