

The AMEC GEO principles

Measuring university reputation in the AI search era

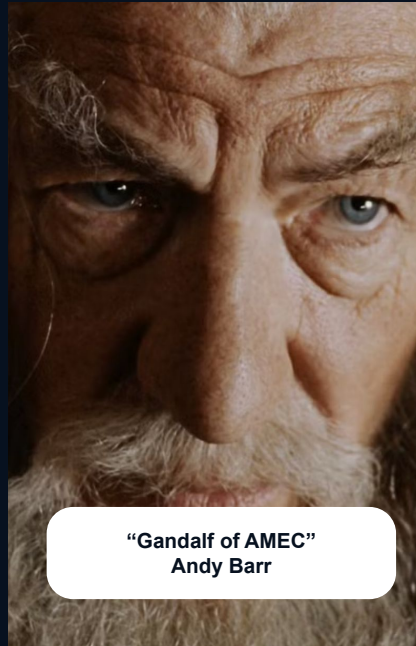
James Crawford
Managing Director, PR Agency One
AMEC board director



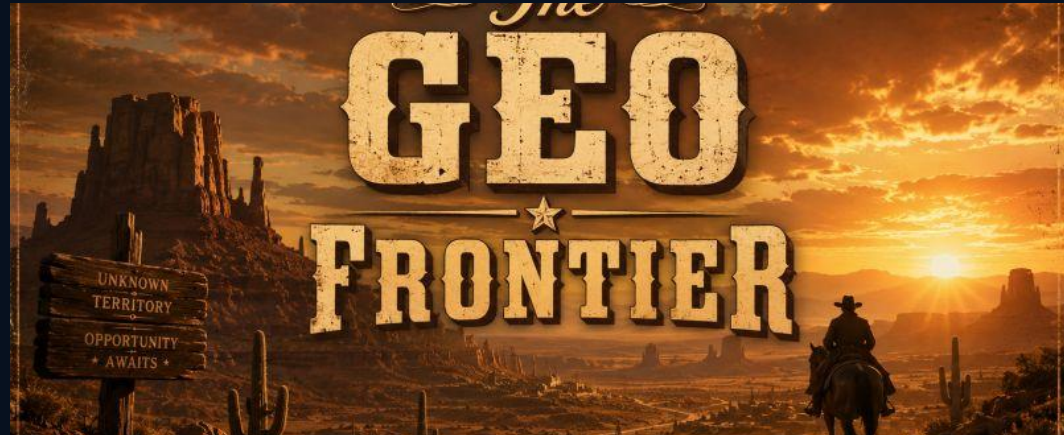
A very serious discipline



"Gandalf of AMEC"
Andy Barr



"Sheriff of the GEO Posse"
Paul Hender



Some people say GEO is not a serious discipline.
And yet here we are, with job titles like these.

So let's make it serious

Why this is important to higher education

AI discovery is starting to influence how universities are found, compared and recommended.

48%

of surveyed applicants used AI to explore options

61%

of AI users used it to compare universities

52%

used it to look up entry requirements

The sector conversation is moving quickly - but much of it is still framed as student recruitment and visibility.

That is understandable. It is also too small for the reality of university reputation.

Sources in speaker notes: UCAS/Wonkhe; ICEF Monitor; HEPI.



Where higher education is now

The discussion exists. It is just not yet mature enough to be called measurement.

What is being discussed

Student recruitment

Course discovery

Entry requirements

Rankings and comparison sites

ChatGPT referrals

What needs adding

Research authority

Expert visibility

Funding credibility

Commercial partnerships

Spin-out reputation

The measurement gap

Visibility is useful. But visibility alone does not tell you whether students trust you, funders rate you, partners choose you, or evidence has improved.

The live higher education GEO conversation is mainly recruitment-led and visibility-led.

Universities are not normal brands

They have several overlapping reputations, each with a different evidence base.

Teaching and student experience

Applications | Conversion
International recruitment
Employability confidence

Research authority

Grants | Academic partnerships
Expert reputation
Policy influence

Enterprise and commercialisation

Spin-outs | Licensing
Investor interest
Industry partnerships

£52.1bn

UK HE sector income, 2024/25

£28.3bn

tuition fees and education
contracts

£7.6bn

research grants and contracts

2,218

active spin-outs, 2024/25

Most brands have a buying journey. Universities have many discovery journeys.

One university, many prompts

International student

“Best universities for data science and employability?”

Policy team

“Universities with regional innovation expertise?”

Journalist

“Leading academics on children’s mental health?”

**AI
answer engine**

This is why sampling needs humility.

Research funder

“Who leads antimicrobial resistance research?”

Investor

“Universities with credible biotech spin-outs?”

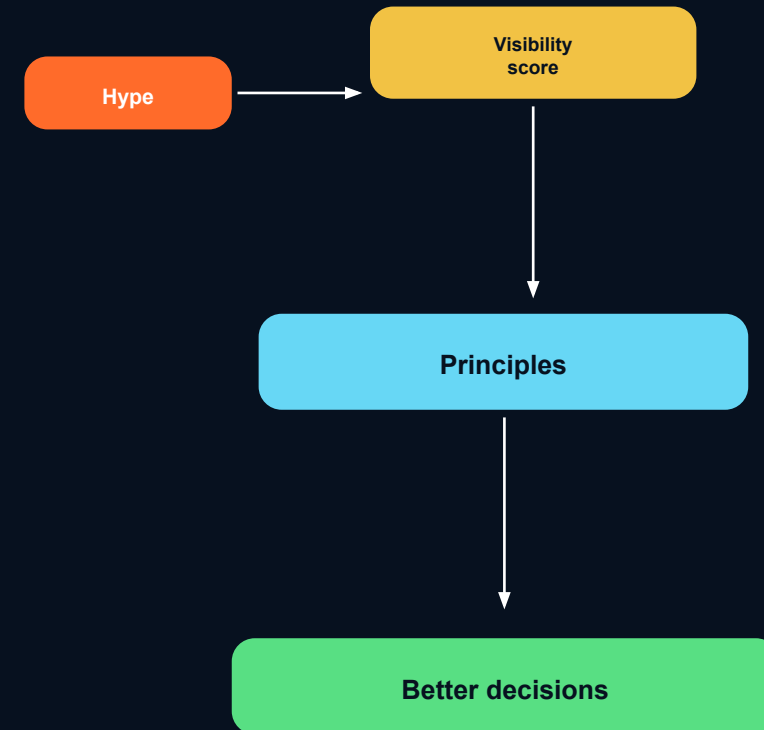
Corporate partner

“University experts in hydrogen storage?”

Why AMEC got involved

AI discovery is a measurement problem.

AMEC exists to bring discipline, transparency and outcome-led thinking to communications measurement. GEO needed that discipline before a thousand dashboards defined it for us.



Without principles, "AI visibility" risks becoming the next vanity metric.

Visibility is not an outcome

Being mentioned is not the same as being trusted.

A downstream AI answer can tell us whether a university appeared, how it was framed, which sources were cited and whether risk is emerging.

It cannot, on its own, prove awareness, trust, behaviour change or institutional impact.



The measurement job is to connect the left-hand signals to the right-hand outcomes - not pretend they are the same thing.

Fifty prompts are not a market

There is no known universe of prompt data.

Prompt sets are useful diagnostics. They are not a census of stakeholder behaviour, especially when answers vary by tool, context, location, language, account history and time.

possible prompt variants $\approx$ choices $^{\wedge}$ variable parts

Simple model, not linguistics - but it shows the sampling problem.

10^5

5 variable parts
100,000 variants



10^7

+2 variable parts
10,000,000 variants

+ two extra details = 100x more variation

If an audit says “we tested 50 prompts”, the question is: which 50, why those, how often, and what does that sample represent?

Search terms are not prompts

Search terms compress intent. Prompts often expand it.

Search

“best university for psychology”

Rankings, snippets, links, clicks



Prompt

“I’m an international student interested in psychology, mental health research, employability and student support. Which UK universities should I consider?”

GEO isn't SEO with a cowboy hat.

For simple course discovery, keyword-style prompt testing may be a starting point. For research reputation, partnerships and trust, it is rarely enough.

Three journeys, three evidence bases

A university GEO programme has to know which reputation it is measuring.

Student recruitment

Prompt:
“Best universities for psychology
and employability?”

Evidence:
Teaching | support | outcomes

Research funding

Prompt:
“Which universities lead
antimicrobial resistance research?”

Evidence:
Expertise | citations | facilities

Commercialisation

Prompt:
“Universities with strong AI spin-outs
and industry links?”

Evidence:
Spin-outs | case studies | investor proof

Same institution. Different audience. Different prompts. Different evidence environment.



For recruitment, GEO is not just “did we appear?” It is “was the answer accurate, current and useful enough to support a next step?”

Student recruitment is the obvious use case

This is where the immediate commercial pressure sits.

What AI may synthesise

Rankings, entry requirements, course pages, employability data, accommodation, city information, student reviews and third-party listings.

What can go wrong

Old entry data. Thin support evidence. Inconsistent fees. Competitors with clearer proof.

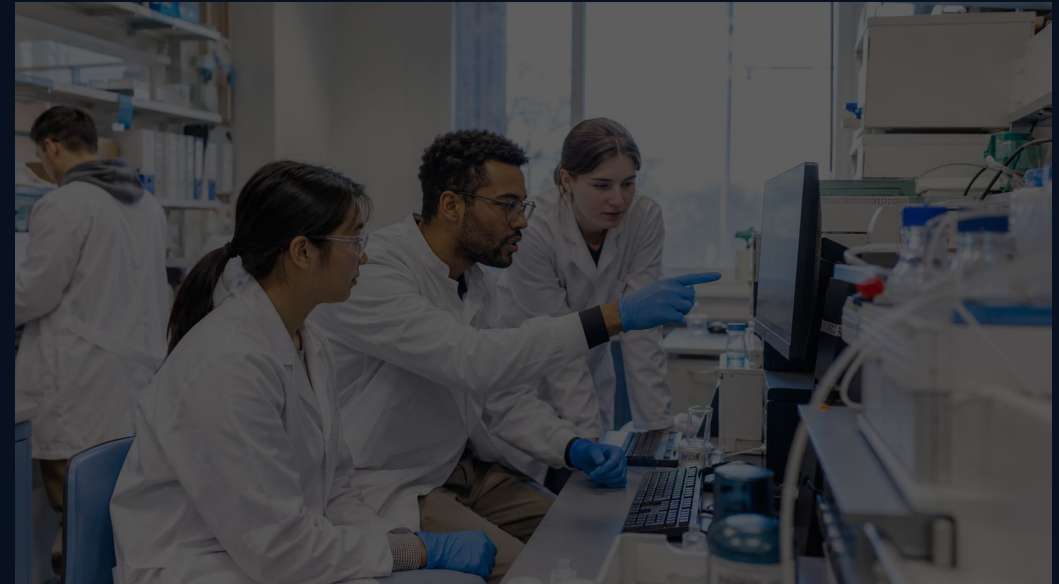
Research reputation is an AI discovery problem too

Evidence can be world-class and still be difficult for AI systems to retrieve, connect and cite.

Expert visibility depends on publications, profiles, repositories, media and institutional pages

AI answers may privilege better-structured evidence, not necessarily better research

If your expertise is buried in PDFs or outdated profiles, it may not travel



Example prompts

“Who leads UK research into antimicrobial resistance?”

“Which universities are credible partners for a climate resilience bid?”



The third journey - commercialisation

Investors, founders, policymakers and corporate partners are also using AI-mediated discovery.

Investor

“Investable AI spin-outs?”

Corporate partner

“Hydrogen storage expertise?”

Founder

“Strong commercialisation support?”

Policymaker

“Regional innovation clusters?”

2,218

active spin-outs, 2024/25

£11.61bn

estimated spin-out turnover

Seven AMEC GEO principles, one guardrail

Do not treat downstream AI visibility as proof of impact. Triangulate.

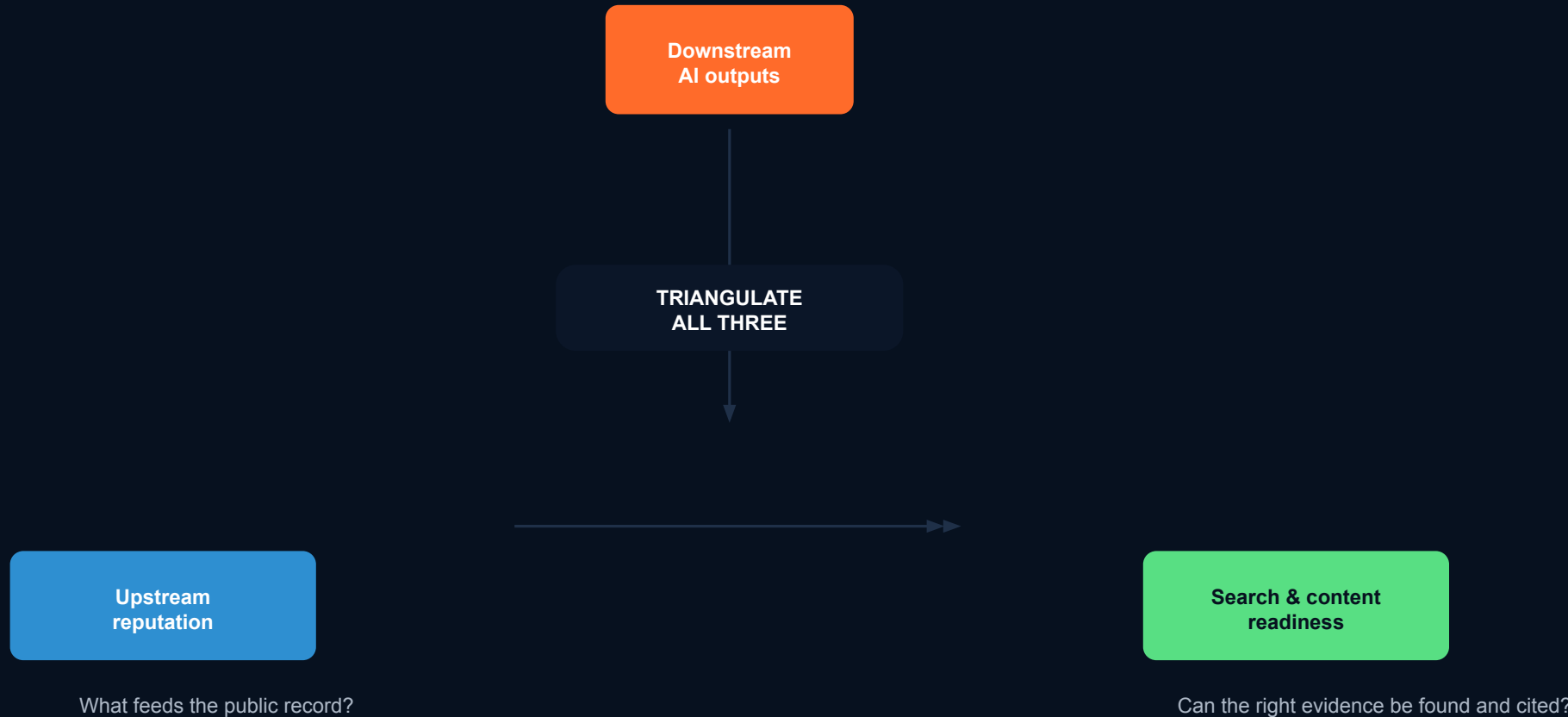
Developed with Mary Elizabeth Germaine - Ketchum; Ben Levine - FleishmanHillard TRUE Global Intelligence; Matt Oakley - Hotwire Global; Amber Daugherty - Big Valley Marketing; Rob Key - Converseon.



Triangulate before you claim impact

Good GEO measurement looks across three connected areas - not one answer, one tool or one tidy score.

What does the model actually present?



Upstream - what feeds the answer?

Before a model summarises you, the public record has already done most of the work.

For universities, upstream reputation is unusually rich - but often fragmented across schools, departments, repositories, rankings, third-party platforms and media.



Question for measurement: is the source environment strong, accurate and current?

Search and content readiness

Can reliable information be found, understood and cited?

This is the bridge between reputation and AI output. Strong evidence matters less if it is buried, inconsistent, technically inaccessible or too vague to support an answer.

Findable

Search visibility, crawlability, structure and freshness

Understandable

Clear language, entity consistency, context and proof

Citeable

Authoritative sources, third-party validation and useful pages

Search readiness is measurement context - not a magic lever.

Downstream - observe, don't worship

AI outputs are directional indicators.

They should be tested transparently across tools, prompts, markets, languages and time.
They are evidence to interpret - not truth to report uncritically.

- Accuracy
- Prominence
- Framing
- Citations
- Omissions
- Reputational risk

Not a single score

Not one model

Not one prompt set

Downstream monitoring is valuable because it shows what is being presented. It becomes dangerous when it is treated as the whole answer.

Three useful examples

Each example sits in a different part of the AMEC model.



Edinburgh

AI-readable entry requirements pages

Accuracy and content governance, not just visibility.



St Andrews

3,000+ questions across 67 categories

A downstream benchmark of AI conversation visibility.



Exeter

Digital Visibility 2030

Search and AI visibility used as organisational glue.

Useful evidence - but still needs triangulation across upstream, readiness and outputs

What good university GEO measurement looks like

Measure the evidence environment, the readiness of that evidence and the outputs people actually see.

AMEC domain	University version	Example measures
Upstream reputation	Evidence about the institution	Media, citations, rankings, reviews, expert profiles, third-party listings
Search and content readiness	Can evidence be found and understood?	Structured pages, current course data, profile quality, citations, internal links
Downstream AI outputs	What do AI systems present?	Accuracy, prominence, framing, citations, omissions, risk

Do not just test whether ChatGPT mentions the university. Measure the conditions that produced the answer.

Do not repeat old measurement mistakes

The sector does not need GEO hacks. It needs decision-grade measurement.

Report a single AI visibility score as impact

Chase hacks or synthetic mentions

Test 50 prompts and call it the market

Separate SEO, PR, research comms and student marketing

Optimise only for student recruitment

Ignore accuracy and reputational risk

Google's caution is useful

Focus on foundational SEO, helpful expert-led content and avoid "AEO/GEO hacks".

Start with governance, not a dashboard

A serious programme begins by mapping audiences, evidence and risk.

1

Map the audiences

Students, funders, partners, journalists and policymakers ask different questions

2

Audit the evidence estate

Course pages, profiles, repositories, rankings, reviews and third-party listings

3

Fix high-risk information first

Entry requirements, fees, admissions, course details and facilities

4

Strengthen expert profiles

Academic profiles are reputation assets, not just staff listings

5

Monitor outputs transparently

Tools, prompts, time, markets and languages need clear disclosure

6

Connect visibility to outcomes

Applications, trust, enquiries, partnerships, grants and reputation

This is a governance and measurement programme - not a one-off prompt test.

The five-question university test

When someone brings you a GEO score, ask for the evidence behind it.

- 1 Which audience does this represent - students, funders, partners, policymakers or journalists?
- 2 Which prompts, tools, markets, languages and dates were used?
- 3 What sources shaped the answers - and are they authoritative?
- 4 What changed upstream, in search readiness and downstream?
- 5 Which outcome does this help us understand - applications, trust, enquiries, partnerships, funding or reputation?

If the method is not transparent, the number is not decision-grade.

Questions for the room

Use these to connect GEO to your own institution.

Which part of your university is most exposed to AI discovery first?

Who owns the evidence estate - marketing, web, admissions, research comms, schools or faculties?

Where is your most important information least visible?

What would be more damaging: not appearing, or appearing inaccurately?

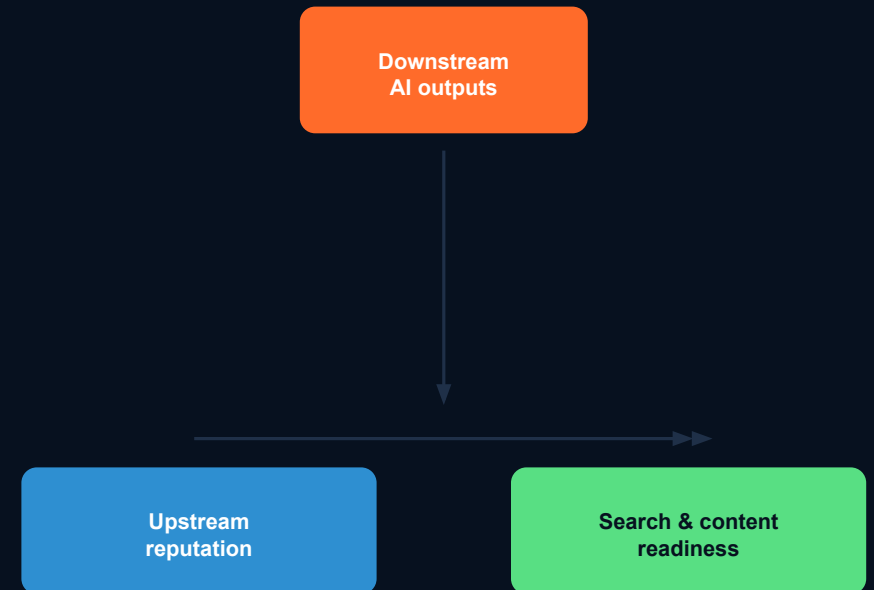
Which outcomes would make GEO worth measuring?

Measure the information environment, not just the screenshot.

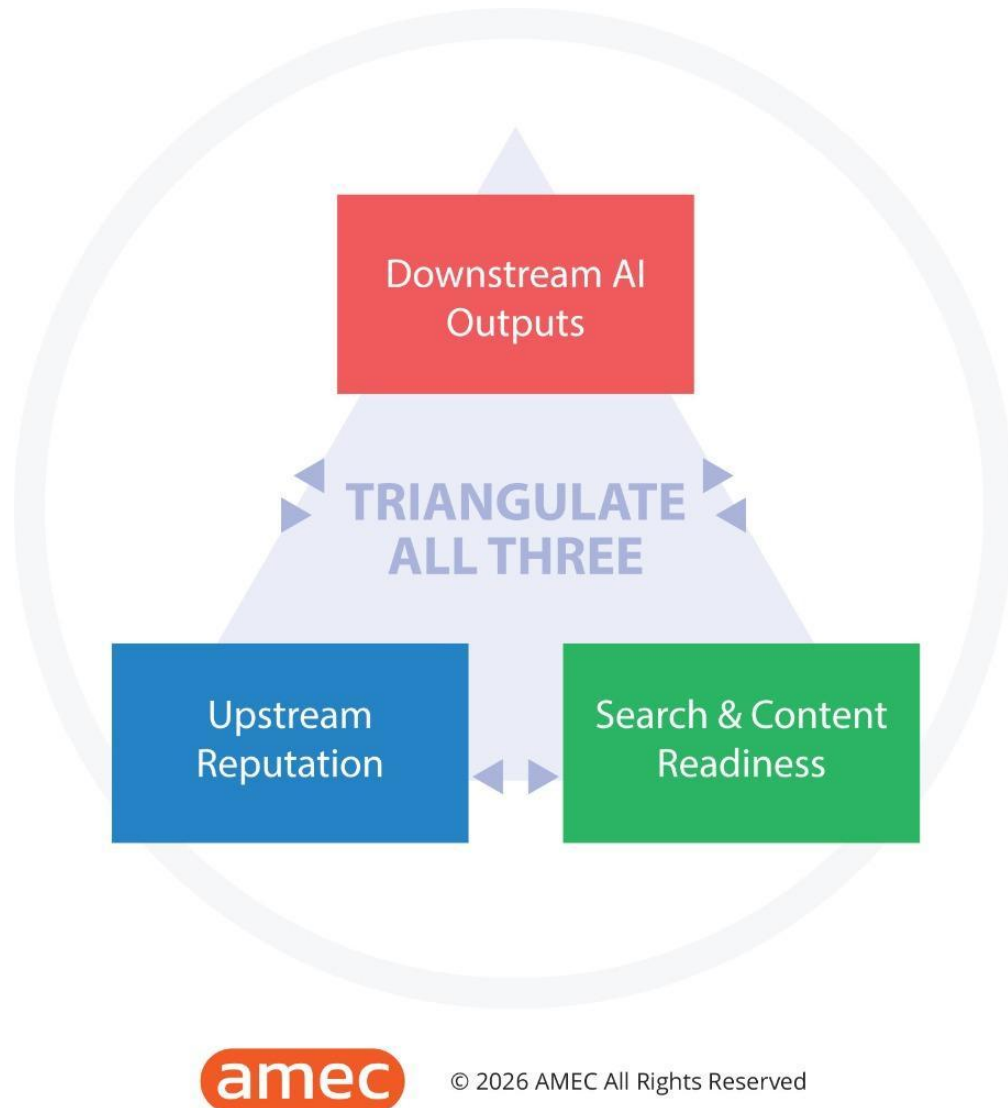
The AMEC GEO principles do not say “ignore AI visibility”. They say measure it with context, transparency and humility - then connect it to reputation, trust and outcomes.

Questions

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Appendix - official AMEC GEO Principles graphic



The 7 GEO Principles

- 1 AI-led discovery should be measured against communication objectives and stakeholder information needs.
- 2 GEO measurement must assess the upstream information environment before interpreting AI-generated answers.
- 3 Search and content readiness should be evaluated as evidence of whether reliable information can be found, understood and cited.
- 4 Observed AI outputs are directional indicators and should be tested transparently across tools, prompts, markets, languages and time.
- 5 GEO measurement should distinguish visibility from outcomes and connect AI discovery to awareness, trust, behaviour and impact.
- 6 Reliable, trustworthy and current sources matter more than volume, promotion or short-term visibility.
- 7 Ethical GEO improves the public information environment and should not manipulate, disguise or flood it.

Sources and further reading

Backup slide for anyone who wants the source trail.

UCAS/Wonkhe

Prospective student AI use and comparison behaviour

ICEF Monitor

AI search and international student recruitment

HEPI

AI visibility and third-party platforms in student discovery

Universities UK

Income, research and spin-out figures

Edinburgh, St Andrews, Exeter

Practical sector examples

Google Search Central

Caution against “AEO/GEO hacks”

URLs are included in the speaker notes for the relevant slides.