

A 2026 RESEARCH BRIEFING

Attention, Trust & the Future of Learning Communities

The data reshaping online learning — and the case
for verified, ad-free communities.

Attention, Trust & the Future of Learning Communities

A 2026 research briefing by Cormonity

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Executive summary

The economics of the internet have quietly reshaped how people pay attention, whom they trust, and how they learn. Advertising-funded platforms are optimised to hold attention; that optimisation now has measurable costs to focus, wellbeing and trust — and it collides directly with the work of any institution that educates and credentials people. This briefing gathers the current evidence, examines what it means for training institutes, and sets out the case for a different model: verified, ad-free learning communities in which the certificate is something an employer can verify in seconds. Every figure is sourced.

Key findings

- **Attention is measurably shorter.** Focus on a single screen has fallen from about two and a half minutes in 2004 to roughly 47 seconds today.
- **The human cost is real.** Teenagers who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of anxiety and depression.
- **Trust online is breaking.** For the first time, most web traffic is automated rather than human.
- **Regulation has turned.** Australia has enacted the world's first under-16 social media ban, with Europe and others following — though early evidence shows bans displace young people rather than protect them.
- **The market is large and growing.** Global education technology is worth roughly \$190 billion and is projected to reach about \$588 billion by 2034.
- **The opportunity is integration.** Platforms uniting learning, community and verifiable credentials — verified, ad-free and privacy-first — are built for this moment. Cormonity is one, live today.

01

The attention economy

How an advertising business model reshaped focus.

Most large platforms are funded by advertising, and that single fact governs their design. To sell more advertising a platform needs more attention, so its feeds, notifications and recommendations are engineered to hold people for as long as possible. The effect is now measurable. Two decades ago the researcher Gloria Mark found that people sustained focus on a single screen for about two and a half minutes; by 2020 that figure had fallen to roughly 47 seconds^[1]. The average person checks their phone around 205 times a day^[2], and knowledge workers are interrupted about every two minutes, with each interruption costing more than twenty minutes to recover from fully^[3].

The mechanism is not accidental. Dr Anna Lembke, who directs Stanford's addiction-medicine clinic, describes the smartphone as "the modern-day hypodermic needle", delivering digital dopamine around the clock^[7]. Variable rewards and infinite feeds are the same design principles that make slot machines compelling; applied to a phone, they are simply more available. The often-repeated claim that human attention has fallen below that of a goldfish is a myth — but the carefully measured reality is, if anything, more sobering^[1].

For institutions, the consequence is not merely personal. Attention is the raw material of learning. An environment engineered to fragment it is, by design, hostile to sustained study — which means the platforms where learners already spend their time are working against the very outcomes an institute exists to produce.

47 seconds
our sustained focus on a single screen — down from 2.5 minutes in 2004

02

The human cost

Who bears the heaviest cost, and why it reaches the classroom.

The heaviest cost falls on the youngest. Around ninety-five per cent of 13-to-17-year-olds use at least one social platform, for an average of roughly three and a half hours a day^[4], and more than a third report being online “almost constantly”^[5]. The U.S. Surgeon General has warned that adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of anxiety and depression^[4], and has framed adolescence as a developmental window of particular sensitivity to these effects.

For any institution responsible for young people, this is a duty-of-care problem playing out in spaces the institution neither runs nor sees. Staff are expected to safeguard learners on platforms they cannot govern, and the downstream effects — disrupted sleep, social comparison, anxiety and disengagement — arrive in the classroom whether or not the institution has any visibility of their cause.

None of this argues that young people should be cut off from one another online. It argues that the environment matters — and that where an institution can choose the environment, it holds a lever it too often leaves unused.

2×

the risk of anxiety and depression for teens on social media 3+ hours a day

03

The trust problem

Why verification is becoming foundational, not optional.

Alongside attention, trust is eroding. In 2025, for the first time, automated traffic overtook human activity online: bots account for the majority of web traffic, and bad bots — fake accounts, scrapers and impersonators — make up more than a third of it^[6]. In most online spaces it has become genuinely difficult to know who, or what, one is dealing with.

For learning and credentialing this is decisive, because it matters a great deal that a person is who they claim to be — and that a credential is genuine. On most platforms, safety and authenticity are handled reactively, through moderation after the fact; but moderation is always a step behind, and where anyone can create an account there is no natural limit to the problem.

The alternative is to treat verification as architecture rather than clean-up: to decide who is admitted, and on what basis, before a space opens. A community of known, accountable members is a far smaller problem to keep safe than one open to all comers — and a credential issued within it can carry proof of its own authenticity.

51%
the share of web traffic that is now automated, not human

04

The regulatory turn

Policy has moved — but bans displace more than they protect.

Policy has shifted decisively. In December 2025 Australia became the first country in the world to restrict under-16s from major social platforms^[8]; the European Parliament has voted overwhelmingly to strengthen protections for minors^[9], and several governments have pledged their own measures. Public appetite is substantial — roughly two-thirds of United States voters favour an under-16 limit^[10].

Yet the early evidence is sobering. Australia's own online-safety regulator reported that more than eight in ten under-16s were still using social media three months after the ban took effect, having migrated to services it did not cover^[8]. The finding carries weight precisely because it comes from the enforcing body. The lesson for institutions is that restriction alone does not protect young people; it displaces them.

The constructive reading is that a wall is not a home. Young people will find somewhere to belong; the task is to make a safe, age-appropriate somewhere available. Notably, education-focused services are frequently carved out of these bans — a meaningful tailwind for verified, learning-oriented platforms. Age assurance is fast becoming a baseline expectation, and institutions will increasingly be asked what their own position is.

8 in 10

under-16s still using social media three months after Australia's ban

05

The opportunity

Three broken systems, one integrated answer.

For training institutes these pressures meet a structural problem of their own making — or rather, of their inheritance. Most run three disconnected systems: a learning-management system few people enjoy, a messaging group nobody governs, and a folder of certificates nobody can verify. Engagement lives in one place, structured learning in another, and the record of achievement in a third, where a certificate is a document anyone could reproduce.

The opportunity is integration: a single platform on which courses, community and credentials sit together, and on which the certificate becomes something an employer can verify in seconds rather than a claim taken on trust. The market backdrop is favourable — global education technology is worth roughly \$190 billion today and is projected to reach about \$588 billion by 2034^[11] — but the sharper point is the credential itself. A verifiable certificate a learner is proud to share is, for the issuing institute, marketing it did not pay for and proof that its training was real.

Two further currents reinforce the case. Institutions in several jurisdictions now face data-residency obligations that favour platforms which can run on their own infrastructure; and the same regulatory turn that constrains advertising platforms tends to privilege verified, education-oriented ones. The direction of travel and the shape of the product point the same way.

\$588B

projected global edtech market by 2034, from about \$190B today

06

A response: verified, ad-free learning communities

What Cormonity is, and what is live today.

Cormonity is built for this moment. It is a learning platform on which every course is a living community — structured courses, discussion, progress and verifiable credentials in one place, on the web and in native mobile apps, ad-free by principle.

Membership is verified: a community is tied to a real-world organisation, and because the platform earns from tools rather than advertising, there is no incentive to maximise attention or to sell data. Learning and belonging sit in the same place — enrolment is membership — rather than being split across a system nobody loves and a chat nobody governs.

The credential is the part learners notice first, and it is live today. When a learner completes a course, a certificate is issued automatically, carries a verification QR on the document, and can be added to LinkedIn in a single click. Anyone the learner shares it with can verify it in seconds on a public page — issue date, issuing institute and a cryptographic check against a tamper-evident issuance record. A forged or altered document fails visibly.

Trust extends to the data itself. Course materials and certificates are served only through expiring signed links; no passports or identity documents are collected; and for institutions with data-residency requirements, the platform is built to deploy on their own infrastructure. All of the above is in production today, behind more than 1,200 automated tests, and has been demonstrated live to institutional stakeholders.

7 Roadmap

Cormonity publishes an honest roadmap, sequenced with its founding institutes. The table distinguishes what is live today from what is arriving next.

Stage	What it includes
Available today	● Structured courses — lessons, quizzes, exams, assignments with instructor review ● Cohorts, capacity, waitlists and a course calendar ● In-course community, discussion, XP and leaderboards ● Live sessions built into courses as events, with per-session attendance ● Native iOS and Android apps ● Verifiable certificates — issued automatically on completion, with a verification QR and one-click Add to LinkedIn ● A public verification page checked against a tamper-evident issuance record ● Learning-analytics dashboard, exportable as OneRoster spreadsheets ● A tamper-evident, append-only audit trail
Rolling out now	● Per-course certificate analytics — completions, certificates issued and verifications received, as a funnel
Next	● Assignment deadlines with late-submission handling ● Recurring live sessions — making the built-in session events repeat automatically ● Diplomas over course sets — a multi-course credential, verifiable like any certificate
Later	● Graded transcripts across a programme, for accreditation requirements ● Workplace and internship assessment, signed off by external mentors at no per-seat cost

Founding institutes set the order — their requirements shape the roadmap.

8 Glossary of terms

Plain definitions of the terms used in this briefing.

Verified community — A community tied to a real-world organisation that is checked before it opens; members join through that organisation rather than signing up anonymously.

Verifiable certificate — A credential whose authenticity anyone can confirm on a public page, checked against the issuer's issuance record — as opposed to a document that must be taken on trust.

Tamper-evident / append-only record — A log to which entries can be added but not silently altered or removed, so any change is detectable. It underpins trustworthy verification.

Attention economy — The business model in which platforms monetise user attention — most often through advertising — creating an incentive to maximise time on screen.

Ad-free by principle — A model funded by tools or subscriptions rather than advertising, removing the incentive to hold attention or to sell user data.

Cohort — A dated group of learners progressing through a course together, with defined capacity and fair, first-come waitlists.

Sequential completion — Course structure that requires steps to be completed in a set order, where order matters to learning.

XP (experience points) — Points awarded for completed work and participation, feeding community leaderboards and challenges.

OneRoster — An education data standard for exchanging roster and gradebook information; used here for exporting analytics in a form other systems understand.

Expiring signed link — A time-limited, private web address used to serve a file, so access cannot be shared or reused indefinitely.

Sovereign (on-premise) deployment — Running the platform on an institution's own infrastructure to satisfy data-residency requirements.

Age assurance — Methods by which a platform establishes that a user meets an age requirement — increasingly a regulatory baseline.

9 References & methodology

This briefing draws on published research and official data current as of 2026. Figures are rounded for readability and attributed below so that each may be independently checked and cited.

Reference numbers correspond to the markers in the text.

- [1] Gloria Mark, *Attention Span* (Hanover Square Press / University of California, Irvine, 2023) — sustained attention on screens, interruption recovery, and the goldfish myth.
- [2] *Reviews.org*, *Cell Phone Usage Statistics* (2024) — average phone checks per day.
- [3] Microsoft, *Work Trend Index* (2025) — frequency of workplace interruptions.
- [4] U.S. Surgeon General, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: Advisory* (2023) — adolescent risk, prevalence of use, and average daily hours.
- [5] Pew Research Center, *Teens, Social Media and Technology* (2025) — teens reporting “almost constant” use.
- [6] Imperva, *Bad Bot Report* (2025) — automated versus human web traffic; share of bad bots.
- [7] Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation* (Dutton, 2021) — the smartphone and digital dopamine.
- [8] Australian eSafety Commissioner (2025–2026) — the under-16 social media restriction and post-implementation usage.
- [9] European Parliament (2025) — resolution to strengthen the protection of minors online.
- [10] Fox News poll (2025) — United States public support for an under-16 limit.
- [11] Fortune Business Insights (2025) — global education-technology market size and forecast.

10 About Cormonity

Cormonity is an ad-free platform for verified learning communities, built in Abu Dhabi. It brings courses, community and verifiable credentials onto one platform, so an institute can run its learning where its community already is — and issue certificates an employer can check in seconds.

The founding-institute programme offers a single per-institution licence — unlimited learners, every feature included, and external assessors free — at founding-partner terms, with a direct line to the team that builds the platform.

Getting started is one cohort: choose a course you already teach, build it on Cormonity in days rather than months, run a single cohort — learners complete, certificates issue, employers verify — and decide with real results in hand.

Bring one course. Run one cohort. Give every graduate a certificate worth sharing.

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No ads, ever · Your data stays yours · Verified communities only