ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

BETTER 2040: An interactive symposium on traversing the complexity and crisis of AI in higher education and designing learning for a better future

Symposium panel

Professor Peter Bryant
University of Sydney

Mr Craig Gilliver
University of Sydney Business

Dr Colin Simpson
Deakin University

Associate Professor Amanda White
University of Technology Sydney

Designed by
Professor Peter Bryant – University of Sydney
Professor Lawrie Phipps – University of Chester (UK)
Dr Donna Lanclos – Independent researcher (USA)

BETTER 2040 is an immersive, interactive symposium that invites participants to explore the technological, epistemic, and ethical disruptions reshaping higher education in the age of generative AI. Set within the fictional University of Banford, participants engage with realistic leadership scenarios, collaborative decision-making, and strategic design challenges to examine trust, pedagogical innovation, and institutional transformation.

Keywords: Online education, Generation Alpha, AI, educational strategy, future focus

Introduction

This highly interactive and innovative symposium will engage participants in collectively exploring the technological, epistemic and ethical challenges that are disrupting higher education as it navigates concurrent states of crisis. As a conceptual, policy, and strategic force, AI has intensified the complexity and risks of learning, teaching and assessment design and reshaped the technological infrastructure that supports both what and how we teach. In response to generative AI, higher education practitioners face ongoing debates and strategic decisions about AI's potential (or perceived potential) to transform the sector and the ongoing balance between AI engagement and the critical "human" aspects of learning. This symposium will engage the participants in the critical debates that will shape the future of education. The symposium is relevant for educational leaders, academics, learning designers and those interested in the future of higher education in times of existential and epistemic challenge.

Symposium premise

It's December 2026. The University of Banford is the world's leading manufacturer of better. Banford is a university built on tradition, modernity and disruption. The University is ready to launch its new institutional strategy – BETTER 2040. This is a future-forward roadmap that reimagines how we learn, teach and discover. It will rebuild Banford to deliver on the needs, expectations, and challenges of future generations of learners and

researchers. A critical foundation of the strategy is Banford Open^{PLC}, a catalysing agent for change in open and online education. In the era of ubiquitous AI, the University of Banford aspire to be the global disruptor of digital skills, connections, innovation, fluency, and the future of work.

Aims of the symposium

Participants will become part of the Banford community, interacting virtually and in person with senior leadership to explore and articulate the challenges facing a university seeking to become AI-first in the face of increasing public and government pressure. By the end of the session, participants will have engaged with the wider technological and epistemic challenges confronting the sector nationally and internationally. Most importantly, they will leave with a lot to think about and process. The aim is not to produce neat, out-of-the-box answers, but to leave participants questioning, curious and provoked, with new perspectives on what the future of higher education might look like.

Theoretical framework

AI has made the creating of a culture of trust in teaching and learning challenging and the rationale for doing so opaque and messy. The responses and reactions to generative AI within the sector have supercharged polarised cultures of acceptance, denial and moral panic (Borkowska & Jackson, 2026). Trust becomes the victim of a war of words and power over AI and what it promises to do, especially for online learning (Dai et al., 2025). Polarised rhetorics about AI frame students as cheats and staff as obsolete, eroding confidence and trust in the systems of higher education (Cotton et al., 2024). There is mounting evidence that students and academics are pushing back, in what Crain et al. (2026) call a postdigital backlash evidenced through government actions. This not a singular instance but a significant generational shift extending through our current cohorts into the next generation – Generation Alpha (Bryant, 2025).

The structure

Inspired by Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperreality, this symposium invites participants to join a fictional institution – The University of Banford. The University is a complex, fully realised world, mirroring reality and offering those who engage with it, safe places to be challenged, to experience emotional and professional journeys and demonstrate their strategic leadership through crisis. Through immersive video scenarios, the leaders of the University will provoke participants through the transitional and uncertain spaces that define technological and epistemological practice in a contested era of generative trust. Engaging in two collaborative time-sensitive activities participants will navigate the challenges of building a university caught in the epistemic and organisational tensions of AI adoption as they prepare the University of Banford for the next generation of its success (BETTER 2040), and the arrival of the next generation of postdigital learners, Generation Alpha. Participants will work in small groups to explore and make sense of the question:

How can we find equilibrium and continue to lead innovation for the next generation of learners within a complex, uncertain, and ever-changing sector in crisis?

Agenda

Introduction to the university, the leadership team and the rules of engagement (5 mins) Open Banford launch (5 mins)	Activity 1: Red lines (15 minutes including report back) Better2040 X Division of Vibes (5 mins)	Activity 2: Open Banford 2030 (15 mins) Bringing it back home (5 mins) Whole group discussion (5 mins

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