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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Reading the cards: Rebalancing the algorithm in higher education

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Higher education continues to navigate uncertainty created by the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Institutional responses have largely focused on assessment reform, educational integrity and governance. This conceptual paper frames GenAI as a wicked problem and considers institutional responses as acts of sensemaking through which universities establish shared understandings and guide actions. Drawing on tarot as an interpretive lens, we introduce eight archetypes as a conceptual framework for examining higher education's response to GenAI. The archetypes were selected for their conceptual resonance with higher education's response to GenAI, the productive tension between the traditional and shadow meanings, and their recognisable symbolism. Organised across three dimensions – encountering uncertainty, seeking certainty and rebalancing educational values – the framework traces readings from *The Fool*, *The Magician*, *The Tower*, through to *The Emperor*, *Justice*, to *The High Priestess*, *The Lovers* and *The Star*. This reading highlights the prominence of disruption, governance and regulation in current responses while bringing wisdom, relationships and hope clearly into view. We argue that rebalancing the algorithm requires educational values to guide GenAI integration. The framework offers an accessible way to surface different perspectives, support collective sensemaking and open dialogue about the educational futures being created.

Keywords: GenAI, higher education, wicked problems, relational pedagogy, educational futures

Introduction

Every generation inherits a technology that promises to transform education. The printing press, the calculator, the internet and the smartphone each arrived accompanied by predictions of educational revolution, anxiety and renewed debate about the purpose of learning. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is no different. Since its rapid emergence in late 2022, universities have produced a proliferation of frameworks, policies, principles and position statements in an effort to respond to an uncertain future (Lodge et al., 2023; Tsao, 2025). In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA) guidance has evolved from a set of broad principles and propositions towards implementing assessment reform strategies across diverse institutional contexts (Lodge et al., 2025). These resources have been developed to help guide institutional decision-making and assessment reform as universities navigate uncertainties created by GenAI.

GenAI presents a wicked problem characterised by uncertainty, competing values and the absence of definitive solutions (Corbin et al., 2025). Questions of assessment, authorship, academic integrity, equity and human capability therefore require ongoing judgement alongside institutional reform (Kofinas et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2026). In responding to wicked problems, institutions naturally seek ways to make uncertainty more navigable (Corbin et al., 2025). They develop policies, construct frameworks and articulate guiding principles. We understand these responses as acts of collective sensemaking: processes through which institutions interpret ambiguity and establish shared understandings the guide action (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). These acts of collective sensemaking reveal which aspects of higher education receive greatest attention in responding to GenAI, and which remain less visible.

This paper argues that rebalancing the algorithm begins with reconsidering the narratives that shape educational innovation. Rather than asking what GenAI will do to higher education, we ask what higher

education's response to GenAI reveals about us. To explore these narratives, we adopt an unconventional interpretive lens: the archetypal symbolism of tarot. Beyond its popular association with fortune telling, tarot provides a symbolic language for interpreting uncertainty and reflecting on competing values, assumptions and possibilities (Semetsky, 2009, 2015).

The eight archetypes were selected using the following considerations: their conceptual resonance with higher education's current response to GenAI; the productive tension between their traditional and shadow meanings, such as The Tower, which represents revelation and transformation alongside crisis, panic and fear; and their recognisable symbolism, which provides accessible and memorable metaphors for exploring complex educational questions. The selection also reflects the conference theme, The Future is Connection. Tarot offers a creative way of imagining possible futures through a practice historically associated with interpretation, dialogue and shared reflection. In this conceptualisation, the cards serve as prompts for conversation, helping to surface different perspectives and support collective sensemaking about the educational futures being created.

We suggest that higher education is already engaged in a collective reading of the cards. Current responses foreground disruption, governance and regulation, while wisdom, relationships and hope remain less visible (Bearman et al., 2023). Reading these responses through the lens of tarot allows us to explore which educational values are being prioritised and which risk being overlooked.

Laying out the cards

Every tarot reading begins by illuminating the present. The cards provide a symbolic language for exploring uncertainty, surfacing assumptions and prompting reflection on the choices ahead. We use this framework to interpret higher education's response to the wicked problem of GenAI. Table 1 presents the eight selected archetypes, their traditional and shadow meanings, and our conceptual reading of each within higher education. In tarot, cards may be read upright or reversed, with the reversed position often drawing attention to the shadow or tension within an archetype (Zalewski & Zalewski, 2019). The cards are organised across the three dimensions that structure the discussion: encountering uncertainty, seeking certainty and rebalancing educational values.

Table 1
Reading the cards: Eight tarot archetypes as a conceptual framework for higher education's response to GenAI

Card	Traditional meaning (upright)	Shadow meaning (reversed)	Interpretation
The Fool	Curiosity, possibility, exploration, new beginnings	Recklessness, naivety, poor judgement	The journey begins. What risks are worth taking?
The Magician	Creativity, capability, transformation, making the impossible possible	Illusion, manipulation, overconfidence, technological solutionism	The promise of possibility. Where does innovation become illusion?
The Tower	Revelation, disruption, collapse of assumptions, transformation	Crisis, panic, fear, paralysis	Everything changes. What has GenAI revealed?
The Emperor	Order, governance, structure, stability	Control, rigidity, bureaucracy, surveillance	Seeking certainty. When does governance become control?
Justice	Fairness, accountability, ethics, transparency	Bias, inequity, disproportionate consequences	Balancing fairness. What does integrity require?
The High Priestess	Wisdom, intuition, reflection, multiple ways of knowing	Silenced voices, overlooked knowledge, exclusion	Wisdom beyond the algorithm. What knowledge are we overlooking?
The Lovers	Relationships, connection, partnership, shared values	Disconnection, transactional interactions, fragmentation	Choosing connection. How do we preserve the human in learning?

The Star	Hope, renewal, compassion, collective flourishing	Cynicism, despair, loss of purpose	Imagining tomorrow. What future are we choosing to create?

These interpretations represent one reading of the eight archetypes and are open to different meanings across contexts and perspectives. Consistent with tarot as an interpretive practice, the cards invite multiple readings. Here, they provide a shared language for reflecting on higher education's response to GenAI.

Encountering uncertainty: the cards we've been dealt

The first three cards – The Fool, The Magician and The Tower – capture the curiosity, possibility and upheaval that have characterised higher education's initial encounter with GenAI. The Fool represents curiosity, possibility and new beginnings. This archetype mirrors higher education's early encounters with GenAI as educators, students and institutions experimented with unfamiliar capabilities while confronting questions about learning, authorship and assessment. Unlike previous educational technologies, GenAI arrived without established norms or accepted practices, requiring institutional decisions before its implications were fully understood. In this sense, The Fool reminds us that uncertainty is not evidence of failure but an inevitable feature of wicked problems, where exploration precedes certainty.

The Magician embodies capability, creativity and transformation, reflecting the promise attached to GenAI across learning, assessment and academic work. Its shadow however is illusion. Narratives of technological solutionism can recast complex educational challenges as problems awaiting technical solutions, obscuring questions of learning, judgement and human development. Some universities quickly embraced narratives of increased productivity, personalised learning and educational innovation. Yet every magician is also a master of illusion. As GenAI has become embedded in higher education, its possibilities have been accompanied by complex challenges, including assessment security, educational integrity and uncertainty about how learning can be assured.

Few cards capture the educational response to GenAI as powerfully as The Tower. Traditionally symbolising sudden upheaval and the collapse of long-held assumptions, The Tower represents the moment when familiar structures no longer provide certainty. For higher education, the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022 marked such a moment, prompting widespread reconsideration of assumptions about assessment, authorship, originality and educational integrity (Bearman et al., 2023). Universities sought to understand the implications of technologies capable of producing sophisticated written, visual and computational outputs with unprecedented ease. Importantly, The Tower does not simply represent destruction, but revelation. GenAI exposed vulnerabilities that had long existed within educational systems, including an overreliance on product-focused assessment, narrow conceptions of authorship and unexamined assumptions about how learning is evidenced. Together, these cards reveal how quickly possibility can give way to uncertainty when established assumptions are disrupted.

Seeking certainty: the cards we've been playing

In response to the disruption represented by The Tower, universities rapidly developed GenAI policies, assessment frameworks, academic integrity guidance and institutional principles. These responses reflect two powerful archetypes: The Emperor and Justice, which together reveal higher education's desire to restore order in the face of uncertainty. The Emperor represents structure, governance and stability. Institutional policies and regulatory guidance reflects efforts to provide consistency during rapid technological change. Yet The Emperor also reveals the shadow of governance: efforts to secure assessment can lead to increased surveillance, control and bureaucracy, creating increasingly rigid systems for students and educators. Policy establishes expectations and guides judgement, but it cannot eliminate the ambiguity inherent in wicked problems.

Traditionally associated with fairness, accountability and ethical decision-making, Justice reflects concerns that GenAI challenges established understandings of assessment, educational integrity and equity. Legitimate questions about transparency, bias, authorship and appropriate use have become central to institutional

conversations. Universities have a responsibility to ensure that assessment remains fair, trustworthy and capable of recognising genuine learning. Equity is strengthened through approaches that recognise context and difference, while authentic learning is supported through assessment practices that foster trust, transparency and meaningful evidence of learning. However, Justice cautions against reducing fairness to compliance. Judgement remains an inherently human practice requiring interpretation, contextual understanding and professional discretion.

The limits of The Emperor's search for certainty are evident in research showing that students often remain unclear about responsible GenAI use despite institutional policies and guidance (Pedlow & Maldon, 2026; Walton et al., 2026). This suggests that ethical GenAI use requires more than compliance, highlighting the importance of self-assessment, reflection and judgement, qualities closely aligned with the wisdom-oriented perspective represented by The High Priestess. If higher education is to rebalance the algorithm, it must also consider what forms of wisdom, care and connection have become less visible within current discourse.

Rebalancing the algorithm: the cards we're bringing into play

Higher education's response to GenAI has largely focused on disruption, governance and regulation. These responses are important, yet navigating a wicked problem also requires ongoing judgement, negotiation and collective sensemaking. Rebalancing the algorithm therefore requires attention to the educational values that guide these responses. The High Priestess, The Lovers and The Star bring three of these values into focus: wisdom, relationships and hope. The High Priestess represents forms of wisdom that resist easy codification. She draws attention to ways of knowing grounded in context and experience, including professional judgement and Indigenous Knowledges. Higher education has long recognised that learning involves more than acquiring information; it requires navigating ambiguity, interpreting complexity and acting responsibly in situations where there is no single correct answer. These capabilities become even more important in an AI-mediated world.

The Lovers remind us that education is fundamentally relational. Relational pedagogy emphasises that learning emerges through relationships that foster connection, belonging and mattering (Gravett, 2022; Gravett et al., 2024; Gravett & Winstone, 2022). As learning becomes increasingly mediated by GenAI, greater attention should be given to the relationships that support students' learning, participation and development. Educational innovation should therefore be judged as much by the quality of the relationships it cultivates as by the sophistication of the technologies it adopts. In traditional tarot, The Star follows The Tower, symbolising renewal after disruption. Rather than certainty, it represents hope, compassion and the possibility of imagining different futures. This is not naïve optimism but recognition that educational futures remain open to human choice. Every assessment policy, curriculum redesign and teaching decision reflects assumptions about what matters most. By foregrounding care, connection, equity and human agency alongside innovation, higher education has an opportunity to shape GenAI in ways that enhance rather than diminish educational purpose.

Together, The High Priestess, The Lovers and The Star shift attention towards the educational values that should guide higher education's response to GenAI. They foreground forms of knowing, relationships and human agency alongside technological capability. Rebalancing the algorithm therefore requires deliberate choices about the values that guide GenAI integration and the educational futures those choices create.

Conclusion

Tarot cards do not predict the future; they invite reflection on the assumptions, tensions and possibilities shaping the present. We argue that higher education is already engaged in a collective reading of the cards as it responds to the wicked problem of GenAI. The archetypes presented in this paper do not prescribe a single pathway forward but illuminate the values underpinning competing educational narratives. While current responses have privileged disruption, governance and regulation, rebalancing the algorithm also requires wisdom, relational pedagogy and hope. These are not alternatives to technological innovation or governance; they are essential to ensuring that educational futures remain deeply human. Ultimately, the integration of GenAI should be guided by the educational values higher education seeks to uphold. The cards have been laid on the table. The reading remains ours to interpret.

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