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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Rebuilding and rehumanising the University of Trust in an era of generative distrust

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As higher education institutions accelerate the adoption of generative AI, questions of trust, human agency, and educational purpose are becoming central to the future of technology mediated education. This paper argues that AI has not created a crisis in higher education so much as exposed and accelerated declining trust within teaching, learning, and assessment. Drawing on Humboldt's conception of the university as a site of productive living tensions, this disciplined provocation examines how technology-mediated education is reshaping the relationships between learners, educators, knowledge, and algorithms. Drawing on inductive theory generated from a two-year constructivist grounded theory study, this paper proposes the notion of epistemic crisis as a way to represent the deficit dialogue driving epistemic change, and the concept of generative distrust exposing the fractures between the productive living tensions that build trust in higher education. The paper contributes to contemporary debates on human-centred learning design by arguing for a rebalancing of the algorithm through pedagogies that foreground care, collegiality, civic engagement, controlled risk and collective mission.

Keywords: Human-centred learning design, generative AI, trust, learning futures, digital pedagogy

Introduction

Debate about the future of higher education in the era of generative AI has intensified and split the sector, often along partisan lines (Kumar et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2024). The polarised positioning that has defined the collective response of higher education is a representation of a bigger crisis, the fear of obsolescence. This is a state of being where feeling precarious, at-risk, or in fear disrupts the capability to teach. Teaching students is the vital lifeblood of every university. Less students, empty campuses and less connection-making undermine the viability of the sector. When competition, productivity and market forces become the primary drivers of university values, then the value proposition of a higher education degree becomes transactional for all involved (Howard et al., 2022). The marketised culture has been destructive to the emotional and physical wellbeing of staff (Messioui et al., 2025), especially those that hold the ideals of transformation, aspiration and education close to their professional and personal identity (McKendrick-Calder et al., 2026). The imperative towards marketisation has also been reinforced with the deployment of AI to replace services, academic judgement and first-line support. It is also, most critically, driving a significant decline in trust in higher education.

A crisis created by a fear of obsolescence has taken hold in many universities. This is not a crisis created by AI, although, since 2023, the responses and reactions to it have significantly amplified the pace and severity of the crisis (UNESCO, 2025). Whilst universities have faced concurrent storms of crisis over the past two decades, and continue to experience the structural, financial and psychological angst after each crisis subsides, the decline of trust in institutions is a real existential threat for teaching and learning. The responses and reactions within the higher education sector globally to AI have supercharged polarised cultures of acceptance, denial and moral panic (Borkowska & Jackson, 2026). A culture of trust in the core activities of the university becomes the victim of a war of words, positionality and claim/counter-claim over AI and what it promises to do (Dai et al., 2025). Polarised rhetorics about AI frame students as cheats and staff as obsolete, and erodes confidence and trust in the systems of higher education (Buele & Llerena-Aguirre, 2025; Cotton et al., 2024). The decline of trust amplifies surveillance fears, compliance and productivity cultures and policy overreach, which undermine collegiality and staff/student happiness and satisfaction (Gruenhagen et al., 2024; Lund et al., 2025).

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The aim of this disciplined provocation is to explore the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of trust and distrust in higher education teaching and learning and how those foundations are being challenged by the current modes of adoption and engagement of AI. I will propose a human-centred agenda to rebuild trust within teaching and learning residing within a digitally saturated and uncertain educational environment. This paper makes three contributions. Firstly, it introduces the concepts of epistemic crisis and generative distrust to contextualise the experiences of learning design within an AI-saturated university. It positions epistemic crisis as a destabilisation of how knowledge, learning and educational experience are understood and trusted, and generative distrust as the relational consequence of this instability across students, educators and institutions. Secondly, it reconceptualises trust through Humboldt's (1970) productive tension between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*. This tension provides a conceptual bridge between diagnosing these contemporary disruptions and considering how the university might restore the conditions for human agency, knowledge-making and trust. Thirdly, it proposes a human-centred framework for rebalancing the algorithm in AI-mediated higher education to a rehumanised ecosystem of trust.

Why does trust matter to a modern university?

Guiso and Alrajeh (2017) define trust as "the faith and confidence one has that things will turn out as one hopes" (p. 109). Trust is equally important for people and societies who reside within that complexity. Complexity shapes the momentum of and importance we place on competing or conflicting interests, values or responses, especially in the face of crisis (Picione & Lozzi, 2021). Complexity fractures emotional and ontological senses of certainty (or trust) into liminal structures and states of being where reason does not (or cannot) act as a beacon that signals the pathways back to stability and belonging. Complexity forces and takes away choices, leaving individuals in between states of certainty and uncertainty, in what Picione et al., (2025) characterise "as a two-faced *Janus* in the effort to hold together stability and change, suspension and transformation, subjectivity and collectivity." Trust is especially important in complex ecosystems like higher education. Fuller (2014) makes the case that higher education institutions create and maintain trust by building social capital through relationships within and between their community. Trust is the essential social currency of universities: students must trust the credibility of what they are taught; academics must trust the authenticity of student work; society must trust the integrity, usefulness, and rigor of academic research; and future generations must trust that a university education is worth the investment.

Trust is essential in technology-mediated teaching and learning because it reduces uncertainty and enables students to engage, create and collaborate with instructors, peers, and digital platforms, particularly in online and hybrid environments where many traditional relational cues are absent (Koh & Daniel, 2022; Otto et al., 2023). As universities continue to expand online learning models (especially as a marketised counter to declining international and domestic enrolments), trust functions as a critical social and pedagogical resource that supports collaboration, participation, and the development of effective learning communities across digitally mediated spaces (van Dorresteijn et al., 2025). Trust is fundamental to the effective use of AI in higher education because students and educators are more likely to adopt and integrate AI tools when they perceive them as reliable, transparent, and aligned with educational goals, or when they have declining trust within their relationships with academic staff, making trust a significant predictor of AI acceptance and use (Eves et al., 2026).

Productive living tensions in teaching and learning

In the 19th century, philosopher and educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt (1970) argued that the "soul" of a university emerged through the living tension between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft,* words without clear, translatable meaning in English. *Bildung* is the inner-looking process of developing autonomous, reflective individuals through transformative learning, where students develop intellectual maturity and ethical awareness beyond vocational outcomes. *Wissenschaft* is a form of truth-seeking. It is the collective, disciplined pursuit of knowledge through rigorous, inquiry-driven research and scholarship (Barnett, 2024). Humboldt's argument goes that the university is a dynamic equilibrium between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*. He argued that genuine learning emerges only when students engage freely with inquiry (in the modern senses of research, curiosity, discovery), allowing personal self-development to unfold through participation in the creation of knowledge. Critical to this thesis is the assertion that genuine scholarly activity depends on

maintaining a productive tension between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*, rather than collapsing one into the other. This tension is not a flaw but the university's defining raison d'être. *Bildung* prevents *Wissenschaft* from becoming mechanical or purely utilitarian, while *Wissenschaft* anchors *Bildung* in rigorous, shared standards of truth. Together, they shape a community devoted to intellectual freedom, holistic development, and the open-ended pursuit of understanding (Bongaerts, 2022).

Trust resides in the productive living tensions that define a university. These tensions emerge from the paradoxical states of institutional organising activities such as academic freedom with accountability, collegial autonomy with managerial control, public mission with market logics. Productive living tensions are critical for the viable functioning of the university and its teaching and learning architecture. The notion of productive living tensions represents the university as an ecology of complex, intersecting, often hierarchical ambitions, motivations, actions and people. In technology-mediated higher education, they drive innovation and siloisation concurrently. Emergent digital platforms, learning analytics, student satisfaction, engagement statistics and online knowledge infrastructures can expand access to *Wissenschaft*, yet they risk reducing *Bildung* to measurable competencies unless they also preserve intellectual freedom, critical reflection, and engagement with the world (Miyamoto, 2022). The emergence of generative AI intensifies the productive living tensions because it can augment the production and exploration of knowledge (*Wissenschaft*), while simultaneously challenging universities to ensure that learners develop judgment, autonomy, and ethical discernment (*Bildung*) rather than merely outsourcing cognition and productivity (Hummel, 2025).

Generative AI and the fracturing of trust

Despite the assertions that the use and innovations inherent within current generative AI systems are a stable state of certainty or an equally stable upwards trajectory of exponential transformative impact, both the technology and its applications to higher education are in a state of flux (Gravett, 2026; McDonald et al., 2025). Since 2023, AI has thrown a sharp, exposing light on the decline of trust in universities. AI has made maintaining a culture of trust challenging and the rationale for doing so opaque. AI is not the "only game in town" and it is not the only crisis impacting on trust. Across the various fora (mainly social media) that amplify the sectors internal and external interrogations of the impacts of AI, how the sector is embracing and integrating AI into teaching and learning has become the primary act of a responsive and responsible institution (Gering et al., 2025; Valentini & Blancas, 2025). Having a policy, a project or a unique selling point on AI is the next urgent decision for institutional leadership. The rapid adoption of generative AI, and the varying ways institutions enable, regulate, or reward its use, has intensified concerns about academic integrity, authorship, transparency, and educational quality. As a result, questions of trust among students, educators, policymakers, and the broader community have become increasingly central to debates about the future legitimacy of higher education (Đerić et al., 2025). The undermining of trust in universities fractures the relationships necessary for knowledge creation, critique and sharing.

Higher education teaching and learning, especially where it innovates and mediates through technology, is built on principles, practices and possibilities. It is the fine balance between the betterment of the self and the interrogation of society. When stakeholders no longer believe in an organisation's guiding principles, or when they doubt the credibility of messages communicating those principles, the organisation's legitimacy is weakened. As legitimacy and trust decline, the shared meanings that underpin organisational practices erode, making those practices less coherent, less effective, and less likely to be sustained (Suchman, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). AI is fracturing epistemic agency and governance in higher education by redistributing who produces, interprets, and validates knowledge. This undermines traditional roles of learners and teachers and erodes trust in teaching and learning practices (Lindebaum et al., 2025). As AI becomes more deeply embedded in the learning technology infrastructure, the capacity for critical engagement and autonomous epistemic judgment is diminished (Chen, 2025; Jose et al., 2025). Klingbeil et al., (2024) argue that academics are increasingly over-reliant, algorithmically appreciative and uncritically trusting in AI outputs for research and teaching. Such transformations contribute to a decay of trust in pedagogical processes when algorithmic outputs are treated as equivalent to human knowledge production without sufficient scrutiny or interpretive oversight (Lindebaum et al., 2025).

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A consequence of AI becoming the dominant institutional priority is that institutions do not have the resources to talk or engage in work that enables social purpose. As Chesterman and Loy (2026) argue "Artificial intelligence has not unsettled the foundations of the public university so much as revealed the fault lines already running through them." Social purpose has been pushed into the borderlands of between, where the core functions of research and teaching not focused on AI are categorised as not mission critical or what industry or government demand of the sector (Thomas, 2025). The counterbalancing that made the productive living tensions *productive* has been disrupted by AI, ironically in the pursuit of productivity (see Watermeyer et al., 2025). Yet, social purpose is at the existential heart of what it means to be a university. It is fundamental to the soul of the university, in part because higher education institutions are essentially *pluralistic,* with divergent goals, requiring ongoing negotiation and shared sensemaking to integrate competing expectations without collapsing them into a single logic (Shields & Watermeyer, 2020).

If the trust of students, teachers and stakeholders is broken or ceded, the productive living tensions begin to spin out of control. Positions are reinforced and lines drawn in the sand. In organisational behaviour theory, when trust breaks down, employees curtail risk-taking in relationships, withhold voice, knowledge, and initiative, which depresses motivation, innovation, execution and learning (Mayer et al., 1995). Identity frays at the edges and then into the centre and staff decouple from the institution's goals and engage in quitting behaviours. Psychological safety collapses (Edmondson, 1999), dissolving the shared learning norms that anchor a coherent and collective "w", leading to fragmented identities and declining senses of belonging. From a curriculum design and delivery perspective, the erosion of trust negatively impacts on how, what and why we teach. The responses to AI are a macrocosm of this. The crises created by AI have been leveraged by some to galvanise action to reimagine a "failing" system of assessment, teaching and student experience (Overono & Ditta, 2025; Selwyn, 2025). For many of those academics and professional staff who have had to redesign education activity and process for successive waves of concurrent crisis, there is a deep sense of exhaustion, cynicism ("here we go again"), and an increasing fog of uncertainty, fear and precarity (Bryant et al., 2025).

The existential angst and institutional cadence of change have created an epistemic crisis. I define epistemic crisis as the persistent questioning undermining the efficacy of the educational experience and the subsequent uncritical redesigning of practices related to effective teaching, learning and assessment. Epistemic crisis manifests as deficits of authentic dialogue about expectations of the epistemic experience. The crisis initiates a dissonance that results in students, staff and stakeholders having three different conversations amongst themselves about their experience and happiness with higher education. AI has acted as an exposing mechanism for the epistemic crisis unfolding within higher education institutions. It has critically unbalanced the productive living tensions of a Humboldtian university. It has created conditions where epistemic uncertainty becomes embedded in interactions between students, academics, institutions and AI. It is present in the debates about future of education, the (de)humanising of teaching and learning and the ongoing efficacy of assessment, creating states of generative distrust in the academic project, in both current and future students (Bryant, 2024, 2025).

Generative distrust is the systemic erosion of trust that ferments when generative AI creates new baselines of truth. It ferments through AI actions such as the production of convincing but weakly verifiable or false content and the blurring and appropriation of authorship, attribution and reliability. It cannot be separated from the deficits in human interaction that come from the uncritical use of AI to augment or replace human tasks in academia. As confidence in these processes declines, confidence in the people and relationships responsible for them also declines, creating a state where students, academics and institutions increasingly question whether they can trust each other. Generative distrust emerges when AI amplifies an existing epistemic crisis and disrupts the productive living tensions. The pursuit and validation of knowledge become increasingly difficult to separate from the human processes of agency and trust. AI in higher education breeds generative distrust because it systematically erodes the ecologies that anchor the value proposition of higher education. Why should a student trust what an academic tells them in a lecture or a tutorial when they suspect it has all been created by AI? Why should an academic trust that a student has learnt something rather than asking AI? Why should industry rely on the academy's research and development outputs when they could ask AI themselves for the same insights and expertise?

Methodology

This research is part of a two-year inductive constructivist grounded theory inquiry, which aims to construct theory and analyse meanings and concepts around the epistemic characteristics of Generation Alpha before they enter the higher education sector in 2030. Constructivist grounded theory was selected because it inductively constructs theory from the meanings, narratives, and experiences embedded within the phenomena under study, while remaining attentive to the situated and co-constructed nature of knowledge production (Charmaz, 2014). In studies that draw upon literature, popular media, and other cultural artefacts as primary data sources, constructivist grounded theory provides a framework for generating theory from the stories, representations, and discursive constructions that emerge across texts, preserving the richness and contextual meaning of these narratives while acknowledging the interpretive role of the researcher.

The study accessed over 350 primary literature sources, theoretically sampled from academic scholarship, professional practice, policy documents and reports, and influential popular media (Clarke, 2005). Rather than treating these sources as objective representations of reality, we examined how different stakeholders construct, negotiate, and contest understandings of Generation Alpha as an emergent educational cohort, with the corpus analysed as socially situated texts rather than neutral repositories of evidence (Birks & Mills, 2015). Constructivist grounded theory enables the inquiry to remain open to theoretically significant phenomena that emerge beyond the initial substantive focus, particularly where iterative analysis reveals unexpected relationships or processes requiring further investigation (Charmaz, 2017).

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The epistemic crisis represents significantly more than a questioning of the efficacy of teaching, learning and assessment. As these uncertainties begin to disrupt the productive living tensions that hold the university together, the relationships through which knowledge is produced, interpreted and validated also become less certain. This unbalancing of productive living tensions creates the conditions for generative distrust, as students, academics and institutions increasingly question the intentions, capabilities and the credibility of one another and the systems through which educational knowledge is produced. Generative distrust is disrupting not just the aspirations and expectations of current students, but those of the students yet to enter higher education. As Generation Alpha enters universities with expectations shaped by AI-mediated systems, data-driven learning environments, personalised technologies, and simultaneous desires for authentic, human-centred experiences the generative distrust driving the epistemic crisis drive dissonances of perspective, action and attitude.

The future needs to be understood not through the lens of polarisation, command and control, consultant-driven rationalisation and empire building, but through a simple focus on the university as a human organisation worthy of being and exhibiting trust. Daft (2015) defines organisations as "(1) social entities that (2) are goal-directed, (3) are designed as deliberately structured and coordinated activity systems, and (4) are linked to the external environment". They are not made up of buildings or technology systems; they are made up of people working together. If the sociality and the productive living tensions break down, they are no longer organisations. This is where you get the proliferation of toxic workplaces, narcissistic leadership, bullying and abusive cultures and collapsing expertise exposed through high staff turnover (Coates, 2024).

In this paper I have posited two educational framing faultlines that have been exposed by AI: epistemic crisis and generative distrust. The epistemic crisis identifies what has become unstable in the ways knowledge, learning and educational experience are understood and valued, while generative distrust describes what happens when this instability becomes embedded in the relationships between students, academics, institutions as mediated through AI. Rebuilding trust and navigating the epistemic crisis requires more than responding to the technology itself. It also requires a greater clarity of action and intent centred around how the crisis will evolve for the next generation students and staff.

There are five lived actions that every member of the university community can engage in as part of their daily and strategic activities to rebuild the culture of trust, internally and externally through effective teaching,

learning and assessment. The five lived actions are *collective mission*, *culture of care*, *controlled risk*, *civic engagement* and *collegiality*. The lived actions can only ferment and maintain trust in an environment of the critical living tensions that define our organisations as university. I have articulated four of these productive living tensions (Research/Teaching, Transactional/Transformational, Staff/Students and Bildung/Wissenschaft).

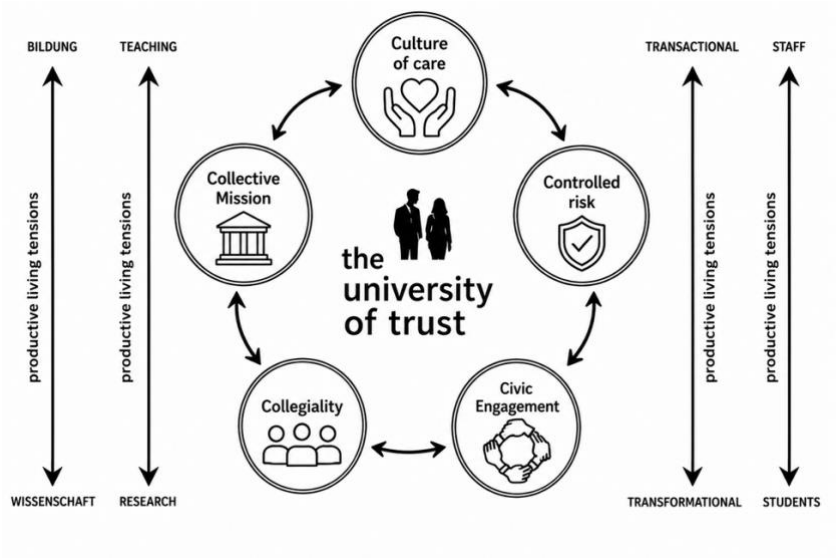


Figure 1
The University of Trust

Collective Mission

To build a culture of trust, the collective mission of the university must be more than a strategic strapline, or an assertion of being good or transformative. The collective mission must be defined and owned by the whole institution and its communities. Real, impactful and authentic trust grows from the intellectual ecology that is dependent on a common direction not a common directive. A collective mission can be hard to promulgate, and in a complex, multi-faculty institution can seem like an impossibility to agree on, without a top-down directive. A collective mission is a unifying narrative that transcends boundaries and individual agendas and embraces the intentions of the positions and practices in living tension. Unlike corporate mission statements, a collaboratively formed academic mantra articulates common purpose, scholarly values and social justice. This shared meaning strengthens trust, nurtures psychological safety, and provides a coherent compass for decision-making, collegial behaviour and community wellbeing.

In a human-centred learning design approach, technology should be implemented in ways that advance a shared epistemic mission. One that is centred on student growth, belonging, and meaningful learning rather than efficiency alone. Learning technologies and AI systems should be evaluated not only for what they automate, but for how they strengthen trust, participation, and collective educational purpose.

Culture of care

It would seem self-evident that a culture of care is a good thing, and when you feel cared for, trust usually follows. Safety, responsibility and concern for people are not universal in universities. Trust cannot be mandated. It must be earned through consistent behaviours, supportive structures, and relational practices that demonstrate the institution, its people, and its communities care. When care is embedded in interactions and in leadership behaviours, it signals that the university can be depended upon to protect wellbeing, uphold dignity, and respond fairly to harm or vulnerability. Care becomes the operational logic that transforms trust from an individual sentiment into a collective institutional trait.

Human-centred learning design prioritises empathy, wellbeing, psychosocial safety, mental health and relational connection by ensuring that digitally mediated learning environments support students as people

rather than merely as users or data points. AI-enabled systems should augment care through timely support, feedback, and inclusion while preserving the human relationships that underpin trust and learning.

Controlled risk

Risk is one the most perfect manifestations of the careful balance that exists in the ecology of productive living tensions. For some, risk needs to be calculated, ranked, and mitigated. For others, principled practices such as academic freedom, assessment and technological governance and policy mitigate risk. Controlled risk represents the ways in which an institution and its staff can enable trust through collective responsibility, an informed criticality of how principles are enacted; not to defend all behaviour but to enable the behaviours that create the environment that promulgates impactful authentic societal change. Controlled risk builds trust in universities by creating environments where uncertainty is managed rather than avoided. When institutions set clear boundaries, provide safeguards, and transparently communicate how risks are anticipated and mitigated, they support the community to engage in challenging ideas, innovative research, and constructive dissent without fear of disproportionate consequences for anyone, no matter where they are in terms of the living tension hierarchy.

Technology-mediated learning should create safe spaces for experimentation and intellectual challenge, enabling students and educators to explore new ideas without fear of disproportionate consequences. Human-centred learning design balances innovation with ethical safeguards, ensuring that the use of AI enhances agency and critical judgment rather than encouraging dependency or cognitive offloading.

Civic engagement

Civic engagement is dialogic. It depends on trust. Students and staff will not participate meaningfully in collective action, governance, or community partnerships unless they believe the institution listens, honours contributions, and protects them from negative repercussions. Trust lowers the social risk of speaking up, collaborating across boundaries, and challenging entrenched norms. The other half of the dialogue resides outside the university. For the community, civic engagement builds trust by demonstrating that the university values shared decision-making, collective responsibility, and reciprocal accountability. The university is part of the community. When industry, government, individuals see their input shaping policy, influencing curriculum, improving the student experience, or strengthening community relationships, they experience the institution as responsive and ethically grounded.

Human-centred learning design recognises that learning is fundamentally social and should connect learners with communities and broader societal challenges. Learning technologies can strengthen trust when they support co-creation and authentic engagement between students, academics, and stakeholders.

Collegiality

Collegiality is the fundamental tenet of the university of trust. True collegiality comes when the intellectual ecology of a university, a faculty, a school, department, or teaching team harmonises. In this harmonisation. trust is critical, because you must trust other parts of the system to do their bit. Collegiality is a respectful, competitive, and collective environment where research, teaching and engagement have common purpose and collective responsibility. It values criticality as a means of making research and teaching better. A collegial institution is defined by how voices are heard, integrated, challenged, and trusted. Collegiality functions as a catalysing principle for trust because it binds academic life to shared norms of reciprocity, respect and intellectual solidarity. When collegiality is inculcated not as politeness but as an epistemic and ethical commitment, it fosters social presence and connection, all of which are glued together by trust.

In technology-saturated educational environments, collegiality is expressed through collaborative knowledge-building and mutual respect. Human-centred learning design accepts that technology mediates but it does not create connection and relationships.

Conclusion

If generative distrust is the accelerant, then the proliferation of the epistemic crisis is the fire consuming higher education's social licence to operate and be trusted. The sector has created seeds of doubt, with the arguments playing out in public fora and amplified by the media. A culture of trust is catalysed by design not by reaction and response. A curriculum plans a journey from not knowing to knowing, affording agency and structure to deliver learning outcomes. Learning technology mediates that journey enabling trust through reliability, integrity and creative possibilities. Trust is the curriculum for the university. The sector in response to AI and whatever the next technological or existential crises are must design its journey from the decline of trust to a state of trust.

The next phase of digital transformation in higher education should not be AI-by-design but trust-by-design, where technology decisions are evaluated according to their capacity to strengthen agency, relationships, belonging, intellectual growth, and epistemic responsibility. Rebuilding trust in higher education is everyone's responsibility. Trust in higher education is not a zero-sum game either. Trust multiplies rather than transfers. When one group gains trust, it does not require another to lose it. Instead, shared transparency, care and accountability expand the overall relational capacity of the institution, strengthening the entire academic ecosystem simultaneously. Trust already flourishes in higher education. Modern education needs to think about what it believes in and stands for, which is what we have always stood for. Being trusted to be a part of the journey of young people, who go on to change our and their world, through work, through research and through ideas.

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