

Faculty Agency in the Interregnum: Rethinking Academic Work in the Age of Artificial Intelligence and Platform Learning

Stephen Murgatroyd
University of Alberta

Abstract

Higher education is entering a period of profound disruption driven by artificial intelligence (AI), demographic change, platformization, and structural shifts in the global knowledge economy. These forces challenge traditional assumptions about the role of universities, the nature of academic work, and the purpose of higher education. This paper argues that the sector is currently experiencing an *interregnum* - a transitional period in which established institutional models are losing legitimacy while new models have yet to fully emerge. Drawing on emerging research and policy data (2024–2026), the paper examines how the knowledge monopoly of universities and colleges is eroding and how platform-based learning ecosystems are reshaping education. It critiques the prevalence of “innovation theatre,” where institutions adopt technologies without fundamentally redesigning core processes, pedagogy or assessment. The paper argues that faculty represent the key leverage point for meaningful transformation. Rather than focusing solely on institutional reform or technological adoption, the future of higher education depends on faculty agency in redesigning learning environments, assessment models, and knowledge ecosystems. The paper concludes by proposing a framework for regenerative pedagogy and outlining strategies for faculty-led transformation in the AI age.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, higher education transformation, faculty work, platform learning, regenerative pedagogy, assessment reform

Introduction

Higher education systems globally are undergoing structural transformation. Artificial intelligence, platform-based learning ecosystems, and changing labour market expectations are reshaping how knowledge is produced, distributed, and applied. These changes challenge long-standing assumptions about universities and colleges as the central institutions for knowledge creation and dissemination.

This moment of transformation can be understood through the concept of *interregnum*, a term popularized by Gramsci (1971) to describe periods when existing institutional arrangements lose legitimacy, but new systems have not yet emerged. In such periods, institutions struggle to adapt while new forms of organization and governance remain uncertain.

Recent scholarship suggests that higher education is now firmly within such an interregnum (Murgatroyd, 2024, 2026). Traditional models of teaching, credentialing, and academic authority

are increasingly under strain, while new models - driven by digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and competency-based learning - are emerging but remain unevenly institutionalized.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating this transition. Generative AI systems can now summarize research literature, generate code, produce essays, and support adaptive tutoring systems. According to EDUCAUSE (2024), more than 70% of university students report using AI tools regularly in their academic work. Simultaneously, digital learning platforms are enabling new forms of distributed education that extend beyond traditional institutional boundaries. These developments raise a fundamental question: what is the role of faculty in an age where knowledge is abundant and increasingly mediated by AI?

This paper argues that the key challenge facing higher education is not technological adoption but the redefinition of academic work and faculty agency. Institutional strategies often focus on technology implementation, but the deeper transformation required concerns pedagogy, assessment, and the design of learning systems.

The argument proceeds in five stages. First, the paper examines the structural forces reshaping higher education. Second, it explores the erosion of the knowledge monopoly of universities. Third, it analyzes changing conditions of faculty work. Fourth, it examines the rise of platform learning ecosystems. Finally, it proposes a framework for regenerative pedagogy and faculty-led transformation.

The Interregnum in Higher Education

Higher education is experiencing multiple simultaneous disruptions. These disruptions are structural rather than cyclical and reflect deeper changes in the global knowledge economy. Several trends illustrate the scale of the transition.

Demographic and Economic Pressures

Demographic shifts are reshaping higher education demand across many developed economies. In Canada, the United States, and Europe, declining birth rates are expected to produce smaller cohorts of traditional college and university-aged students in the coming decade (OECD, 2023).

At the same time, universities and colleges face increasing financial pressure. Public funding for higher education has stagnated or declined in real terms across many OECD countries, while institutional operating costs continue to rise. These pressures are forcing institutions to reconsider long-standing operational models – the common response being to close “underperforming” programs and lay off staff. What rarely happens is that these challenges are used to reimagine the work of the institution at a fundamental level.

The Acceleration of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is transforming knowledge production and distribution. Generative AI tools such as large language models can support writing, research synthesis, coding, tutoring, and data analysis. AI adoption has been extremely rapid. McKinsey (2025) estimates that over 60% of knowledge workers now regularly use generative AI tools, and education is among the fastest-growing adoption sectors. AI-driven tutoring systems also enable highly personalized learning support. Such systems challenge the traditional assumption that teaching must occur within fixed classroom structures and be delivered by qualified academic staff. Expert knowledge is now freely available.

Platformization of Education

Another structural shift is the rise of digital ecosystems. Platform companies such as Coursera, edX, Guild Education, Degreed, Skillsoft and LinkedIn Learning connect learners, employers, and educational providers within global learning marketplaces. Platform economics differs significantly from traditional institutional models. Platforms act as intermediaries linking multiple stakeholders rather than delivering services directly (Parker et al., 2016). In these ecosystems, universities and some colleges become participants within broader learning networks rather than sole providers of education.

The Knowledge Explosion

One defining feature of the current era is the extraordinary growth of global knowledge production. According to Elsevier's global research report, more than five million scholarly articles are now published annually across approximately 37,000 peer-reviewed journals (Elsevier, 2024). Knowledge accumulation is accelerating due to global research collaboration and digital publishing infrastructure.

At the same time, artificial intelligence systems are transforming how knowledge is accessed and synthesized. AI tools can summarize large bodies of research, generate explanatory text, and assist with literature reviews.

Historically, universities and research enabled colleges derived much of their legitimacy from their role as gatekeepers of scarce knowledge. Faculty expertise represented access to intellectual resources that were otherwise difficult to obtain. Today, however, knowledge is abundant and widely accessible. AI systems increasingly act as intermediaries between learners and knowledge sources. This shift creates what might be described as an identity crisis for higher education.

If knowledge is readily available, the value proposition of universities and colleges must evolve beyond knowledge transmission. Instead, higher education must focus on:

- critical thinking and judgment
- ethical reasoning
- problem-solving in complex contexts
- collaborative inquiry

- application of knowledge to real-world challenges

These capabilities require learning environments that extend beyond traditional lecture-based instruction.

The Changing Reality of Faculty Work

The transformation of higher education is occurring alongside profound changes in the conditions of academic labour. While technological change and new learning models dominate policy discussions, the daily realities of faculty work are shifting in ways that often receive less systematic attention. Across many countries, faculty employment has become increasingly precarious. In the United States, for example, more than 70% of faculty appointments are now non-tenure track, including part-time adjunct positions and short-term contracts (American Association of University Professors, 2023). Comparable patterns are evident in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where universities and colleges increasingly rely on contingent labour to provide instructional capacity.

This restructuring of the academic workforce has several implications. First, it alters the professional identity of academic work. The traditional model of a stable academic career combining teaching, research, and service is increasingly replaced by fragmented roles with limited security and fewer opportunities for long-term intellectual development. Second, it creates uneven distributions of institutional power and autonomy, with a shrinking proportion of faculty holding permanent appointments. Third, it can weaken institutional capacity for innovation, as contingent faculty often have limited influence over curriculum design or institutional strategy.

At the same time, the expectations placed upon faculty have expanded significantly. In addition to teaching and research responsibilities, faculty are now expected to engage with digital learning environments, support student wellbeing, respond to new accountability frameworks, and navigate rapidly changing technological landscapes. These developments are reshaping academic work in ways that extend far beyond the classroom.

Several interrelated pressures illustrate how the nature of academic work is evolving.

Administrative Expansion

Faculty increasingly report expanding administrative responsibilities related to accreditation, assessment reporting, quality assurance processes, and compliance requirements. Universities and colleges operate within increasingly complex regulatory environments, and faculty are often responsible for producing the documentation necessary to demonstrate institutional accountability.

These developments reflect broader trends toward audit culture within higher education (Power, 1997). Audit cultures emphasize measurable outcomes, documentation, and compliance procedures intended to ensure institutional transparency and effectiveness. While such systems can strengthen accountability, they can also generate substantial administrative burdens.

In many institutions, faculty are now required to document learning outcomes, track student engagement data, participate in program review cycles, respond to external accreditation processes, and complete detailed reporting requirements. These activities consume significant time that might otherwise be devoted to research, curriculum innovation, or mentoring students.

Some scholars argue that these developments are also part of a broader surveillance culture emerging within higher education. Digital learning platforms generate extensive data about teaching practices and student engagement, which can be used to monitor faculty performance and evaluate instructional effectiveness (Lorenz, 2013; Williamson, 2017). While learning analytics can provide valuable insights into teaching and learning processes, they also raise questions about professional autonomy and the extent to which faculty work is increasingly subject to managerial oversight.

The cumulative effect of these developments is a significant expansion of the bureaucratic dimensions of academic work. Faculty members often describe spending increasing portions of their time responding to institutional reporting requirements rather than engaging in activities directly related to teaching or research. This expansion of administrative responsibilities contributes to perceptions of workload intensification and professional fatigue across many institutions.

Student Mental Health

Faculty also face growing demands related to student wellbeing. Over the past decade, universities have witnessed a substantial increase in reported mental health challenges among students. Surveys indicate that approximately 75% of post-secondary students report experiencing significant mental health challenges, while nearly half report symptoms associated with depression (American College Health Association, 2023).

Several factors contribute to this trend. Rising financial pressures, uncertainty about future employment, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pervasive influence of social media all appear to play roles in shaping student wellbeing. In addition, the rapid pace of social and technological change has created environments characterized by heightened uncertainty and stress.

Faculty frequently serve as the first point of contact for students experiencing mental health difficulties. Students often disclose personal challenges during office hours, in email communication, or within classroom interactions. While universities and colleges have expanded counselling services and mental health resources, faculty continue to play an important role in identifying and responding to student distress.

As a result, many institutions are encouraging faculty to adopt trauma-informed pedagogical approaches. Trauma-informed teaching emphasizes empathy, flexibility, and awareness of the diverse challenges students may face in their personal lives (Carello & Butler, 2015). Faculty may adjust assignment deadlines, incorporate flexible participation policies, or redesign assessment structures to accommodate student wellbeing concerns.

However, these expectations also raise complex questions about the scope of faculty responsibilities. Few faculty members are trained mental health professionals, yet they increasingly encounter situations that require sensitivity to student wellbeing. This expansion of pastoral responsibilities adds another dimension to academic work and can contribute to emotional labour and burnout. The challenge for institutions is therefore to balance compassion and academic rigor while ensuring that faculty receive appropriate support and training in responding to student wellbeing issues.

Threats to Academic Freedom

The contemporary academic environment is also shaped by increasing political polarization, social media scrutiny, and reputational risks. Universities and colleges historically functioned as spaces for intellectual exploration where controversial ideas could be debated openly. However, the dynamics of public discourse have shifted dramatically in the digital age.

Social media platforms amplify public attention to academic speech and can rapidly transform classroom discussions or research findings into national or international controversies. Faculty may find their teaching materials, public commentary, or research outputs circulating widely online, sometimes outside their original context. These dynamics can create environments in which faculty feel constrained in expressing controversial ideas or pursuing certain research agendas. Scholars have documented growing concerns about the chilling effects of public scrutiny on academic discourse, particularly in politically sensitive fields such as climate policy, public health, race relations, and gender studies (Finkin & Post, 2009).

In some jurisdictions, legislative interventions have also begun to influence academic freedom debates. Governments in several countries have introduced policies related to free speech on campus, curriculum oversight, or ideological balance within universities. While these policies are often framed as protecting intellectual diversity, they can also create new forms of regulatory pressure on academic institutions. The result is a complex environment in which faculty must navigate competing expectations: the expectation to engage publicly with societal issues, the risk of reputational controversy, and institutional pressures to manage public perception.

These dynamics may reshape how faculty approach public scholarship, classroom discussions, and research dissemination. Some scholars argue that universities must reaffirm their commitment to academic freedom while also developing strategies to support faculty navigating the increasingly volatile public discourse environment.

Together, these trends - workforce precarity, administrative expansion, rising student wellbeing challenges, and evolving debates about academic freedom - contribute to what many faculty describe as a transformation of the academic profession. Faculty roles are expanding beyond traditional teaching and research responsibilities to encompass new forms of administrative work, emotional labour, and public engagement.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for any discussion of the future of higher education. The transformation of universities and colleges cannot be understood solely through

technological change or institutional strategy. It must also be understood through the evolving realities of academic work and the conditions under which faculty operate.

Innovation Theatre

Despite widespread recognition of structural challenges in higher education, many institutional responses remain superficial (Murgatroyd, 2026). Universities and colleges frequently adopt new technologies without fundamentally redesigning operating or pedagogical practices. AI tools, learning analytics systems, and digital platforms are often layered onto existing business and instructional models. This phenomenon can be described as *innovation theatre* - symbolic adoption of innovation without structural change.

Examples include:

- AI add-ons in learning management systems that automate minor tasks but do not transform curriculum design or pedagogical models.
- Plagiarism detection tools replacing assessment redesign, focusing on policing academic integrity rather than rethinking how learning is evaluated in an AI-enabled environment.
- Pilot micro-credential programs with limited labour-market recognition, often launched as experiments but disconnected from coherent institutional credential frameworks.
- Strategic plans emphasizing innovation without pedagogical reform, using the language of disruption while leaving business, teaching and learning structures largely unchanged.
- Learning analytics dashboards that track student engagement but do not lead to redesigned learning pathways or new instructional strategies.
- Short-term “innovation labs” or centres for teaching innovation that produce pilot projects but remain peripheral to mainstream academic practice.
- Digital transformation initiatives focused primarily on infrastructure, such as new learning management systems or classroom technologies, rather than on curriculum redesign.
- AI policy statements that emphasize ethical concerns or academic integrity but provide little guidance for transforming pedagogy or assessment.
- Isolated faculty development workshops on AI or digital learning that raise awareness but do not lead to sustained institutional change.
- Technology-driven marketing campaigns positioning institutions as innovative without corresponding changes to program structures or learning models.

Such initiatives create the appearance of change while leaving underlying educational structures largely intact. As a result, many institutions appear innovative at the level of rhetoric and technology adoption while continuing to operate according to traditional academic models. Such initiatives create the appearance of change while leaving underlying educational structures largely intact.

The End of the Broadcast Model

The traditional instructional model in higher education is often described as *the broadcast model*: knowledge is transmitted from instructor to students through lectures, readings, and structured course materials. In this model, the instructor functions as the primary source of disciplinary knowledge, while students are positioned largely as recipients of information. Teaching typically occurs in time-bounded classroom settings, with learning assessed through examinations or written assignments designed to measure the accurate reproduction of knowledge.

This model emerged in an era when knowledge was relatively scarce and difficult to access. Universities and colleges functioned as repositories of specialized expertise, libraries provided access to limited collections of scholarly resources, and faculty represented the principal means through which disciplinary knowledge was interpreted and transmitted. Within this context, lectures and seminars served as efficient mechanisms for communicating knowledge to large groups of students.

However, the conditions that originally gave rise to the broadcast model have changed dramatically. The rapid expansion of digital knowledge resources - including open-access journals, online databases, digital libraries, and AI-powered knowledge systems - means that students now have access to vast quantities of information independent of traditional classroom instruction. Generative artificial intelligence systems can summarize complex research literature, generate explanations of difficult concepts, and assist with problem solving in ways that significantly alter the informational landscape of higher education.

As a result, the scarcity model of knowledge, which historically underpinned teaching in higher education, is being replaced by an environment characterized by abundance of information. In such contexts, the value of higher education increasingly lies not in transmitting information but in helping students interpret, evaluate, and apply knowledge effectively.

Research in the learning sciences has long emphasized that meaningful learning occurs not primarily through passive reception of information but through active engagement with ideas, iterative practice, and feedback processes (Ambrose et al., 2010). Constructivist approaches to learning highlight the importance of students actively constructing understanding through inquiry, experimentation, and reflection (Bransford et al., 2000). These insights have gained renewed relevance in an era where digital technologies provide students with unprecedented access to information.

In this context, the role of faculty is evolving significantly. Rather than acting primarily as transmitters of knowledge, faculty increasingly function as architects of learning environments that enable students to develop deeper intellectual capabilities. Several dimensions of this shift can be identified.

Designers of Learning Experiences

Faculty increasingly function as designers of learning experiences rather than simply presenters of content. This involves creating structured learning environments that guide students through processes of inquiry, exploration, and knowledge application. Effective learning design requires careful attention to sequencing of activities, integration of formative feedback, and alignment between learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment practices.

Learning design has therefore become a central component of contemporary academic work. Faculty must consider how digital tools, collaborative activities, simulations, and project-based learning can be integrated into coherent learning experiences that promote conceptual understanding and practical capability. In many disciplines, this involves shifting from lecture-dominant approaches toward blended learning models that combine online resources with interactive classroom engagement.

Facilitators of Inquiry

In addition to designing learning environments, faculty increasingly serve as facilitators of inquiry. Rather than presenting knowledge as fixed and authoritative, instructors guide students in exploring questions, evaluating evidence, and constructing arguments. Inquiry-based learning approaches encourage students to investigate complex problems, engage with multiple perspectives, and develop the intellectual habits associated with scholarly thinking.

Such approaches align with broader goals of higher education, including the cultivation of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and independent judgment. Faculty facilitate inquiry by framing problems, encouraging dialogue, and helping students navigate disciplinary debates. In doing so, they model the practices of scholarly reasoning that define academic disciplines.

Mentors and Coaches

Another emerging dimension of faculty work involves mentorship and coaching. In environments where information is widely available, the personal guidance provided by experienced scholars becomes increasingly important. Faculty mentor students in developing research skills, navigating intellectual challenges, and connecting academic learning with broader professional and societal contexts.

Coaching approaches emphasize personalized feedback, encouragement, and the development of self-directed learning capabilities. Rather than simply evaluating student performance, faculty support students in identifying their strengths, addressing weaknesses, and developing strategies for continued intellectual growth. These mentoring relationships often extend beyond formal coursework and play a critical role in shaping students' academic identities.

Evaluators of Complex Problem-Solving

Faculty also play a crucial role in evaluating complex intellectual work. While AI systems may assist with routine assessments or automated grading, evaluating sophisticated reasoning, creative synthesis, and ethical judgment remains fundamentally human tasks. Faculty assess

students' abilities to integrate knowledge across disciplines, apply theoretical concepts to real-world challenges, and construct coherent arguments supported by evidence.

This evaluative role becomes particularly important as universities move toward more authentic forms of assessment, including project-based assignments, portfolios, and collaborative problem-solving activities. Such assessments require nuanced professional judgment that cannot easily be reduced to automated scoring systems.

Taken together, these shifts suggest that the central function of faculty in contemporary higher education is not the delivery of knowledge but the cultivation of intellectual capability. Faculty help students develop the capacity to think critically, evaluate evidence, synthesize ideas, and apply knowledge creatively in complex contexts.

In an age of abundant information and rapidly evolving technologies, the value of higher education lies less in access to knowledge than in the ability to use knowledge wisely. Faculty therefore play a crucial role in shaping the intellectual habits, ethical frameworks, and analytical skills that enable students to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Regenerative Pedagogy

One emerging response to the structural challenges facing higher education is the concept of regenerative pedagogy (Murgatroyd, 2023). While much of the debate about educational reform focuses on technology adoption or institutional restructuring, regenerative pedagogy shifts attention toward the design of learning itself (Sterling, 2011). The core premise is that education should not simply transmit knowledge or produce credentials but should cultivate intellectual, social, and civic capacities that enable learners to contribute meaningfully to society.

The concept of regeneration originates in ecological thinking, where regenerative systems are understood as systems that restore and renew themselves over time rather than merely sustaining existing conditions. In sustainability discourse, regenerative approaches go beyond maintaining equilibrium; they actively strengthen the resilience and vitality of ecological and social systems. Applied to education, regenerative pedagogy therefore emphasizes learning processes that generate lasting intellectual capability, social engagement, and adaptive capacity rather than simply delivering curricular content.

This perspective challenges traditional models of higher education that emphasize standardized curricula, disciplinary silos, and assessment systems designed primarily to certify knowledge acquisition. Instead, regenerative pedagogy encourages educators to design learning environments that foster creativity, collaboration, ethical reflection, and engagement with real-world challenges.

In this sense, regenerative pedagogy aligns with broader shifts in higher education toward capability development rather than knowledge transmission. As information becomes increasingly abundant and accessible through digital technologies and artificial intelligence systems, the distinctive contribution of universities lies increasingly in their ability to cultivate

the intellectual habits and civic capacities that enable learners to use knowledge responsibly and creatively. Several key principles characterize regenerative learning environments.

Context-Driven Learning

A central feature of regenerative pedagogy is the emphasis on context-driven learning. Traditional educational models often present knowledge in abstract or decontextualized forms, separated from the complex social and environmental challenges that learners encounter in the real world. Regenerative learning environments, by contrast, ground learning activities in authentic contexts that require students to apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

Context-driven learning encourages students to engage with complex problems that do not have simple or predetermined solutions. For example, students may examine climate resilience in their local communities, explore public health responses to emerging diseases, or analyze the social and economic impacts of technological change. Such challenges require learners to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines while considering ethical, cultural, and practical dimensions of decision-making.

This approach also encourages students to recognize that knowledge is not static but evolves through ongoing inquiry and dialogue (Wahl, 2016). By situating learning within real-world contexts, regenerative pedagogy helps students develop the ability to navigate complexity and uncertainty - capabilities that are increasingly important in contemporary professional and civic life.

Place-Based Education

Closely related to context-driven learning is the principle of place-based education. Place-based approaches emphasize the importance of local environments and communities as sites of learning. Rather than treating education as a purely abstract intellectual activity, place-based learning recognizes that knowledge is embedded within cultural, ecological, and social contexts.

Place-based learning can involve partnerships between universities, colleges and local organizations, community-based research projects, or experiential learning opportunities that allow students to engage directly with the challenges facing their communities. Such experiences help students understand how academic knowledge connects to broader societal issues.

In addition to strengthening the relevance of learning, place-based education can also foster a stronger sense of civic responsibility among students. When learners see how their knowledge and skills can contribute to addressing local challenges, they are more likely to view education as a process of engagement with society rather than simply a pathway to individual career advancement.

Place-based approaches are particularly important in an era characterized by global challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and technological disruption. Addressing such challenges requires both global awareness and local action. Regenerative pedagogy therefore encourages learners to connect global knowledge with local experience.

Circular Learning Processes

Another defining feature of regenerative pedagogy is the emphasis on circular or iterative learning processes. Traditional educational models often follow linear sequences in which information is delivered, assignments are completed, and knowledge is assessed at fixed points in time. Regenerative learning environments, by contrast, emphasize cycles of exploration, reflection, experimentation, and revision.

In circular learning models, students repeatedly revisit ideas and problems from different perspectives, gradually deepening their understanding. Feedback plays a central role in this process, enabling learners to refine their thinking and improve their work over time. Such approaches align closely with contemporary research in learning sciences, which emphasizes the importance of iterative practice and formative feedback in promoting deep learning.

Circular learning processes also encourage students to view learning as an ongoing journey rather than a series of discrete tasks. By engaging repeatedly with complex ideas, learners develop resilience and intellectual curiosity. Mistakes and uncertainties become opportunities for growth rather than signs of failure.

This emphasis on iteration is particularly relevant in professional contexts where knowledge evolves rapidly. In fields such as technology, healthcare, and environmental science, professionals must continually update their knowledge and adapt to changing circumstances. Regenerative pedagogy prepares students for such environments by cultivating habits of continuous learning.

Transdisciplinary Integration

Complex global challenges rarely align neatly with traditional disciplinary boundaries. Issues such as climate change, artificial intelligence governance, public health, and sustainable economic development require insights from multiple fields of knowledge. Regenerative pedagogy therefore emphasizes transdisciplinary integration - the ability to connect ideas and methods across disciplinary domains.

Transdisciplinary learning environments encourage students to collaborate with peers from different academic backgrounds, explore multiple ways of understanding complex problems, and develop integrative forms of thinking. Such collaboration mirrors the interdisciplinary nature of many contemporary professional contexts.

Faculty play a crucial role in facilitating these integrative learning experiences. Rather than simply transmitting disciplinary knowledge, educators guide students in exploring how different fields of knowledge intersect and inform one another. This process helps learners develop intellectual flexibility and the ability to synthesize diverse perspectives.

Transdisciplinary approaches also challenge traditional academic structures that organize knowledge into separate departments and programs. Regenerative pedagogy therefore

encourages institutions to experiment with new forms of curriculum design that allow students to engage with complex problems from multiple vantage points.

Taken together, these principles suggest that regenerative pedagogy represents more than a collection of innovative teaching techniques. It reflects a broader rethinking of the purposes and practices of higher education. Rather than focusing narrowly on content delivery or credential production, regenerative learning environments seek to cultivate the intellectual capabilities, ethical awareness, and collaborative capacities needed to address the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

In regenerative pedagogical models, impact becomes the central intention of learning. Students are encouraged not only to understand the world but also to contribute to its improvement. Learning becomes a process through which individuals develop the capacity to engage thoughtfully and responsibly with the social, technological, and environmental systems that shape contemporary life.

Reimagining Assessment

Assessment practices represent one of the most significant barriers to meaningful pedagogical transformation in higher education. While universities and colleges have experimented with new instructional technologies, online learning environments, and innovative curricular structures, assessment systems have often remained largely unchanged. Traditional assessment models continue to rely heavily on examinations, essays, and assignments designed to measure the accurate reproduction of knowledge within defined time constraints.

Historically, such assessment practices were closely aligned with the broadcast model of education. When knowledge transmission was the central goal of instruction, assessment focused on determining whether students had absorbed and retained the information presented during lectures and readings. Examinations and essays served as efficient mechanisms for evaluating knowledge acquisition across large student populations.

However, the conditions that once supported these assessment models have changed dramatically. Digital information environments and generative artificial intelligence systems now enable students to access knowledge instantly and generate sophisticated written responses to many types of assignments. As a result, traditional assessment practices increasingly struggle to distinguish between students' own intellectual work and externally generated outputs.

These developments have triggered widespread concern within higher education about academic integrity and the future of assessment. Many institutions have responded by strengthening plagiarism detection tools or restricting the use of AI technologies in coursework. While such responses address immediate concerns, they do not fully resolve the deeper challenge posed by AI-enabled knowledge environments.

Rather than focusing solely on detecting misconduct, a growing number of scholars argue that universities must fundamentally rethink the purposes and design of assessment itself (Bearman et al., 2023; Murgatroyd, 2024b). If students can access vast amounts of information and

computational assistance, the central question becomes not whether they can reproduce knowledge but whether they can apply knowledge thoughtfully, creatively, and ethically.

Reimagining assessment therefore requires a shift from measuring information recall toward evaluating intellectual capability and applied understanding. Several emerging approaches illustrate how assessment practices may evolve in response to these changing conditions.

Competency-Based Assessment

One important development is the growing interest in competency-based assessment. In competency-based models, learning is evaluated according to clearly defined capabilities rather than time spent in a course or completion of specific assignments. Students demonstrate mastery by applying knowledge and skills to authentic tasks that reflect real-world challenges.

Competency-based approaches align assessment more closely with professional practice. Rather than asking students to reproduce theoretical knowledge in isolation, competency-based assessments require them to demonstrate how knowledge can be used to address practical problems. For example, engineering students might design solutions to infrastructure challenges, while public policy students analyze complex policy scenarios and propose evidence-based recommendations.

Such approaches shift the emphasis of assessment from content coverage to demonstrable capability. They also allow students to progress at different rates depending on their mastery of particular competencies. In this way, competency-based assessment challenges traditional models in which learning is measured primarily through standardized examinations administered at fixed intervals.

Project-Based Evaluation

Another promising approach involves project-based evaluation, in which students work on extended projects that require the integration of knowledge across multiple domains. Project-based assessments often involve real-world problems, collaborative work, and iterative feedback processes.

For example, students might develop policy proposals, design technological prototypes, conduct community-based research, or produce multimedia presentations addressing complex societal issues. Such projects encourage students to apply theoretical concepts in practical contexts while developing communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Project-based assessments also allow instructors to evaluate multiple dimensions of student learning simultaneously. Faculty can observe how students approach problem definition, how they integrate evidence from multiple sources, and how effectively they communicate their ideas. This multidimensional evaluation provides richer insights into students' intellectual development than traditional examinations.

Importantly, project-based approaches also align more closely with professional environments where individuals rarely work in isolation or within tightly constrained time frames. Instead, complex problems require collaboration, iteration, and sustained engagement - qualities that project-based assessments can help cultivate.

Authentic Problem-Solving Assignments

A related development involves the increasing use of authentic problem-solving assignments. Authentic assessments situate learning tasks within contexts that resemble real-world situations. Rather than solving artificial problems with predetermined answers, students are asked to grapple with ambiguous or contested issues. For instance, students in environmental studies might evaluate competing proposals for sustainable land use, while business students analyze market strategies for emerging industries. Such tasks require learners to consider multiple perspectives, assess evidence critically, and articulate well-reasoned conclusions (Wiggins, 1998).

Authentic assessments are particularly valuable in preparing students for professional contexts characterized by uncertainty and complexity. They encourage learners to move beyond memorization and toward deeper engagement with ideas. Moreover, they allow faculty to evaluate students' ability to exercise judgment and ethical reasoning - capabilities that are increasingly important in fields influenced by technological change.

Reflective Portfolios

Another emerging assessment model involves the use of reflective portfolios. Portfolios allow students to document their learning over time through collections of projects, essays, research outputs, and reflections on their intellectual development.

Unlike single assignments or examinations, portfolios capture the cumulative nature of learning. They provide opportunities for students to demonstrate how their understanding has evolved and how they have integrated knowledge from different courses or experiences.

Portfolios also encourage metacognition - the process of reflecting on one's own learning. By writing reflective commentaries on their work, students develop greater awareness of their intellectual strengths, areas for improvement, and strategies for continued growth (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

From an instructional perspective, portfolios provide faculty with richer evidence of student learning than isolated assessments. They reveal patterns of development and allow educators to evaluate how students apply knowledge across different contexts.

Peer and Community-Based Evaluation

Finally, some educational models incorporate peer and community-based evaluation. In these approaches, assessment involves input not only from instructors but also from peers, community partners, or external stakeholders.

Peer evaluation encourages students to engage critically with the work of others while developing collaborative skills. Community-based evaluation, on the other hand, allows external stakeholders - such as community organizations or industry partners - to assess the relevance and impact of student projects. Such approaches broaden the scope of assessment beyond the classroom and reinforce the connection between academic learning and societal challenges. They also reflect the collaborative nature of many professional environments in which individuals must work effectively with diverse stakeholders.

Taken together, these emerging approaches illustrate how assessment practices can evolve to better align with the intellectual and professional demands of contemporary society. Rather than focusing primarily on detecting academic misconduct or enforcing traditional examination formats, universities have an opportunity to redesign assessment systems that emphasize creativity, collaboration, ethical reasoning, and applied problem-solving.

In an era characterized by abundant information and powerful AI tools, the central question for higher education is no longer whether students can access knowledge. Instead, the question is whether students can use knowledge responsibly, critically, and imaginatively. Reimagining assessment therefore represents a crucial step in aligning higher education with the realities of the twenty-first century knowledge environment.

The Platform Institution

Another significant structural shift affecting higher education is the emergence of what may be described as the platform institution. Over the past decade, digital platform models have transformed numerous sectors of the global economy, including transportation, retail, finance, media, and hospitality. Companies such as Amazon, Uber, Airbnb, and Apple have demonstrated how digital platforms can create ecosystems that connect producers, consumers, and service providers within integrated networks.

These developments are now beginning to influence the structure of higher education. Traditional universities and colleges have historically operated as relatively self-contained institutions that control most aspects of the educational process, including curriculum design, teaching delivery, credentialing, and quality assurance. In contrast, platform-based systems function as ecosystems that connect multiple actors, including educational providers, learners, employers, credentialing bodies, and technology companies.

In a platform model, the institution does not necessarily provide all educational services directly. Instead, it acts as a facilitator and coordinator of learning opportunities, enabling learners to access educational resources from a range of providers while maintaining oversight of quality and credential recognition. The platform institution therefore represents a shift from vertically integrated universities toward networked learning ecosystems (Kenney & Zysmam, 2016).

This transformation is closely connected to broader developments in the digital economy. Platform businesses create value primarily by enabling interactions between different user groups rather than by producing goods or services themselves (Parker et al., 2016). Similarly,

platform institutions in higher education may create value by enabling connections among learners, educators, industry partners, and knowledge resources.

Several key characteristics define the emerging platform institution.

Ecosystem-Based Learning

One defining feature of platform institutions is the development of ecosystem-based learning environments. In traditional higher education models, students typically enroll in a single institution that provides most of their learning experiences. In platform models, learners may access courses, learning modules, mentoring opportunities, and experiential learning projects from a variety of sources.

For example, a student pursuing a degree in data science might combine university courses with industry certifications, online modules offered by global learning platforms, and project-based experiences with technology companies. The platform institution coordinates these experiences, ensuring that learning pathways remain coherent and aligned with defined learning outcomes.

This ecosystem-based approach reflects the increasingly distributed nature of knowledge production and professional expertise. Many cutting-edge developments occur outside traditional academic environments, particularly in fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital entrepreneurship. Platform institutions enable universities to connect students with these broader knowledge networks.

Modular and Stackable Credentials

Another important dimension of platform institutions is the use of modular and stackable credential systems. Traditional degrees often require students to complete fixed sequences of courses over several years. While such programs provide structured pathways for learning, they may lack flexibility in responding to rapidly evolving knowledge and labour market demands.

Platform-based systems allow learners to accumulate smaller units of learning - such as micro-credentials, certificates, or specialized modules - that can later be combined into larger credentials. These stackable learning units enable individuals to update their knowledge throughout their careers without necessarily enrolling in full-time degree programs.

Such approaches also support lifelong learning by allowing professionals to acquire targeted competencies when needed. For example, individuals working in technology-intensive fields may periodically enroll in short courses to learn about emerging programming languages, cybersecurity practices, or data analytics techniques.

By integrating modular credentials into coherent learning pathways, platform institutions can offer greater flexibility while maintaining academic standards and credential recognition.

Integration with Industry and Community

Platform institutions also emphasize stronger integration between universities, industry, and community organizations. In traditional models, universities often functioned as relatively autonomous institutions whose primary activities occurred within campus boundaries. Platform models, by contrast, encourage collaboration with external partners in the design and delivery of educational experiences.

Industry partners may contribute to curriculum development, provide experiential learning opportunities, or participate in the evaluation of student projects. Community organizations may collaborate with universities on research initiatives or service-learning programs that address local challenges.

These partnerships help ensure that educational programs remain relevant to evolving societal and economic needs. They also provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts, strengthening the connection between academic learning and professional practice.

At the same time, such collaborations raise important questions about governance and institutional autonomy. Universities must balance the benefits of external partnerships with the need to preserve academic independence and intellectual integrity.

Data-Driven Learning Ecosystems

Digital platforms also generate large amounts of data about learning processes. Platform institutions can use these data to support data-informed learning ecosystems that provide personalized learning pathways and targeted feedback to students (van Dijck et al, 2018).

Learning analytics systems can identify patterns in student engagement, monitor progress toward learning outcomes, and recommend resources tailored to individual needs. In principle, such systems allow institutions to provide more responsive and adaptive educational experiences.

However, the use of data analytics also raises important ethical considerations. Universities must ensure that data collection and analysis respect privacy, maintain transparency, and avoid reinforcing existing inequities within educational systems. Responsible governance of learning data will therefore become an increasingly important component of platform-based educational models.

Taken together, these developments suggest that higher education institutions may increasingly evolve into platform institutions that coordinate complex learning ecosystems rather than simply deliver courses. In this model, the college and university remains an important guarantor of quality, intellectual rigor, and credential legitimacy. However, the locus of learning expands beyond the physical campus to include digital platforms, workplaces, community organizations, and global knowledge networks.

The emergence of platform institutions does not imply the disappearance of universities. Rather, it signals a transformation in how universities organize learning and engage with broader knowledge ecosystems. Faculty, students, and institutional leaders must therefore reconsider traditional assumptions about where learning occurs, who participates in educational processes, and how knowledge is validated.

In the context of the broader interregnum currently shaping higher education, the platform institution represents one possible pathway through which universities may adapt to an increasingly networked and digitally mediated world.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Academic Work

Artificial intelligence is likely to transform many aspects of academic work in the coming decade. While earlier waves of educational technology primarily supported administrative efficiency or digital delivery of existing courses, recent advances in generative AI represent a more profound shift in the intellectual landscape of higher education. Systems capable of producing text, code, data analysis, and multimedia outputs have begun to alter how knowledge is produced, accessed, and communicated.

These developments raise significant questions about the future role of faculty within universities. In the past, the academic profession derived much of its authority from the ability to access, interpret, and communicate specialized knowledge. However, AI systems are increasingly capable of performing many tasks traditionally associated with scholarly work. They can summarize large bodies of research literature, generate draft manuscripts, assist with coding and statistical analysis, and provide automated feedback on student writing.

As a result, some observers have suggested that artificial intelligence could eventually replace large portions of academic labour. However, such claims often underestimate the complexity of academic work and the distinctive capabilities that faculty bring to educational environments. Rather than replacing faculty entirely, AI is more likely to reconfigure the distribution of academic tasks, automating some routine activities while amplifying the importance of others.

Several dimensions of this transformation are particularly significant.

First, AI systems are likely to automate many routine informational tasks within academic work. Activities such as literature searches, basic data analysis, drafting of preliminary reports, and the generation of instructional materials can increasingly be supported by AI tools. These capabilities may reduce the time faculty spend on repetitive tasks, potentially allowing greater focus on higher-order intellectual activities.

Second, AI may significantly alter the ways in which faculty design and deliver instruction. AI-powered tutoring systems can provide individualized explanations, adaptive practice exercises, and real-time feedback to students. Such systems may complement traditional teaching by offering personalized learning support at scale. In this context, faculty roles may shift toward designing learning environments, curating high-quality resources, and guiding students through complex conceptual challenges.

Third, artificial intelligence may influence how research is conducted. AI tools capable of analyzing large datasets, identifying patterns in scientific literature, and generating research hypotheses are already beginning to reshape scholarly workflows. In fields such as computational biology, climate science, and social data analytics, AI-assisted research may enable scholars to explore questions that would previously have been impossible to investigate (Dwivedi et al, 2023).

However, these technological capabilities also raise important concerns. AI-generated outputs may contain errors, biases, or fabricated information. Without careful human oversight, the use of AI in research and teaching could lead to the amplification of misinformation or the erosion of scholarly standards. Faculty therefore play a critical role in ensuring that AI tools are used responsibly and that their outputs are interpreted with appropriate caution.

In addition to these practical considerations, the rise of artificial intelligence also raises deeper philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge and expertise. Universities have historically functioned as communities of scholars dedicated to the pursuit of truth through critical inquiry. AI systems, by contrast, generate responses based on statistical patterns within training data rather than through processes of understanding or reasoning.

This distinction underscores the continuing importance of human judgment within academic work. Faculty contribute forms of intellectual engagement that extend beyond the capabilities of current AI systems. These include ethical reasoning, contextual interpretation of complex problems, creative synthesis of ideas across disciplines, and the mentoring relationships through which scholarly traditions are transmitted.

Consequently, the future of academic work is likely to involve collaboration between human scholars and intelligent machines rather than the replacement of one by the other. Faculty will increasingly need to develop new forms of digital literacy that allow them to evaluate AI-generated outputs, integrate computational tools into research workflows, and design learning experiences that help students use AI responsibly (McKinsey & Co, 2025).

These developments also highlight the importance of critical engagement with technology. Universities must not only adopt AI tools but also examine their social and ethical implications. Questions concerning algorithmic bias, data privacy, intellectual property, and the environmental impacts of large-scale computing systems will become central topics of academic inquiry.

In this evolving landscape, the distinctive contribution of faculty may lie less in producing information and more in cultivating wisdom about how information should be used. Faculty will help students develop the intellectual judgment necessary to navigate complex technological environments, evaluate competing sources of information, and make decisions informed by ethical considerations.

The emergence of artificial intelligence therefore represents both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education. While AI may transform many aspects of academic work, it also highlights the enduring importance of human intellectual capabilities. In an era characterized by abundant information and powerful computational tools, the role of universities may increasingly center on

developing the reflective, ethical, and creative capacities that allow societies to use knowledge responsibly.

Faculty Agency and Institutional Transformation

Institutional transformation in higher education has historically occurred slowly. Universities and colleges are complex organizations characterized by distributed governance structures, multiple stakeholder interests, and deeply embedded traditions. While these structures help protect academic integrity and intellectual independence, they can also limit the pace at which institutions adapt to rapidly changing environments.

Research on organizational change consistently shows that large institutional reforms are difficult to implement. Many change initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes because they attempt to alter complex organizational systems through centralized planning alone (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Strategic plans may articulate ambitious visions for innovation, yet the practical realities of institutional governance - committee processes, regulatory requirements, budget constraints, and competing priorities - often slow the implementation of meaningful change.

This structural reality presents a particular challenge in an era defined by rapid technological transformation. Artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and new knowledge ecosystems are evolving far more quickly than traditional institutional decision-making processes. Universities and colleges may spend years developing policy frameworks or strategic initiatives intended to address these developments, even as technological change continues to accelerate.

In such circumstances, waiting for comprehensive institutional strategies may not be a viable option. While institutional leadership remains important, the practical transformation of higher education frequently occurs through incremental innovations developed within teaching and research practices. These innovations often emerge not from senior administrative planning but from faculty experimentation within classrooms, laboratories, and collaborative learning environments.

Faculty therefore occupy a uniquely important position in shaping the future of higher education. While institutional leaders establish strategic directions, faculty translate those directions into concrete educational practices. Curriculum design, assessment methods, learning activities, and research approaches are ultimately shaped through the daily work of academic staff. As a result, faculty represent what might be described as the operational core of institutional transformation.

In the context of the interregnum currently affecting higher education (Murgatroyd, 2024a), faculty agency becomes particularly significant. Periods of institutional transition rarely produce clear blueprints for change. Instead, they create environments characterized by uncertainty, experimentation, and competing visions of the future. Within such environments, innovation often emerges through localized initiatives that gradually reshape institutional practices over time.

Faculty can therefore act as practical innovators within their own spheres of influence. This innovation may take many forms. Instructors may redesign assessment practices to reflect the realities of AI-assisted knowledge production. Faculty may develop collaborative projects that integrate community partners or industry stakeholders into learning environments. Others may experiment with interdisciplinary teaching models or incorporate AI-assisted research tools into student learning experiences.

Importantly, such innovations do not necessarily require comprehensive institutional approval before they begin. Many meaningful changes in higher education have historically emerged through bottom-up experimentation rather than through centrally mandated reform. Faculty who experiment with new approaches in their own courses can generate insights that later inform broader institutional initiatives.

This perspective does not imply that institutional leadership is irrelevant. Universities require governance structures that maintain academic standards, ensure equitable access to learning opportunities, and support the long-term sustainability of educational programs. However, meaningful transformation rarely occurs through policy development alone. Policies typically codify innovations that have already emerged through practice.

For this reason, faculty should not view themselves solely as implementers of institutional strategies. They are also co-creators of institutional futures. By experimenting with new pedagogical approaches, exploring emerging technologies, and engaging students in new forms of inquiry, faculty help define the directions in which higher education evolves.

Periods of rapid technological and social change often require a willingness to experiment even in the absence of complete certainty. Not every innovation will succeed, and some initiatives may require revision or abandonment. Yet the willingness to explore new possibilities is essential if universities are to remain intellectually vibrant and socially relevant.

Indeed, one of the paradoxes of higher education reform is that institutions frequently encourage innovation rhetorically while maintaining structures that discourage risk-taking in practice. Faculty who seek to redesign courses or experiment with new teaching methods may encounter administrative barriers, workload constraints, or evaluation systems that prioritize traditional forms of academic productivity.

Overcoming these constraints requires a cultural shift in how academic work is understood. Innovation should be recognized as a legitimate and valuable dimension of scholarly practice rather than as a peripheral activity undertaken only by a small subset of faculty.

In practical terms, this means that faculty may sometimes need to act before institutional policy fully catches up with emerging technological realities. Responsible experimentation - guided by ethical considerations, transparency with students, and careful reflection - can help universities learn how new technologies and pedagogical approaches function in practice.

Within such contexts, innovation often proceeds through a pragmatic principle familiar to many entrepreneurial environments: it is sometimes easier to ask forgiveness than to seek permission

in advance. While this principle should not be interpreted as an invitation to disregard institutional responsibilities, it does recognize that transformative change often requires individuals to explore new approaches before formal approval structures are fully established.

The future of higher education will therefore depend not only on institutional strategies or technological capabilities but also on the willingness of faculty to act as innovators within their own domains of practice. Faculty who engage actively with emerging technologies, experiment with new learning designs, and encourage students to explore complex problems will help shape educational models that remain relevant in an increasingly dynamic world.

In this sense, the transformation of higher education is unlikely to occur solely through centralized planning. Instead, it will emerge through the collective actions of faculty who are willing to rethink traditional practices and experiment with new possibilities for learning, research, and intellectual collaboration.

The Future

Higher education is entering a period of profound structural transformation. Artificial intelligence, platform learning ecosystems, and changing labour market expectations are reshaping both the purpose and the organization of universities. The traditional institutional model - built around disciplinary silos, broadcast pedagogy, and relatively stable career pathways - is increasingly under pressure from technological change, new knowledge networks, and evolving societal needs.

These developments challenge long-standing assumptions about academic authority, the nature of expertise, and the role of faculty within universities. Yet they also create significant opportunities for renewal. Periods of disruption often generate the conditions in which institutions can rethink their fundamental purposes and develop new models of learning that better reflect the realities of contemporary society.

The key question facing higher education is therefore not whether technology will reshape learning. That transformation is already underway. The more important question is who will shape the redesign of educational systems in response to these changes.

In many institutions, the initial response to technological disruption has been to develop policy frameworks, strategic plans, and governance processes intended to regulate emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. While such efforts are important, they cannot by themselves generate the educational innovation required in this moment of transition. Institutional strategies often move slowly, while technological change continues to accelerate.

Faculty therefore remain uniquely positioned to lead the practical transformation of higher education. Through curriculum design, assessment innovation, and the creation of collaborative learning environments, faculty shape the daily realities of teaching and learning. It is within these spaces - classrooms, research groups, community partnerships, and digital learning environments - that meaningful educational change occurs.

Faculty can design learning experiences that help students navigate a world characterized by abundant information, powerful computational tools, and complex global challenges. They can experiment with new forms of inquiry-based learning, develop assessment approaches that emphasize capability rather than memorization, and integrate emerging technologies in ways that deepen rather than diminish intellectual engagement. In doing so, faculty can help create educational systems that are adaptive, regenerative, and socially responsive.

The current moment may therefore best be understood as an interregnum - a transitional period in which established institutional models are losing their effectiveness while new models have not yet fully emerged (Murgatroyd, 2024a). In such periods, uncertainty and experimentation are inevitable. Universities must navigate competing visions of the future while responding to technological and social change that continues to unfold.

Yet interregnums are also periods of possibility. They create opportunities for individuals and institutions to rethink established practices and to explore new approaches to learning, knowledge creation, and intellectual collaboration. The future of higher education will not be determined solely by technological developments or institutional strategies. It will also be shaped by the choices made by faculty, students, and academic communities as they experiment with new ways of teaching, learning, and engaging with the world.

In this sense, the transformation of higher education will emerge not only from formal policy decisions but from the collective creativity and agency of faculty who are willing to rethink traditional practices and explore new possibilities. By embracing this responsibility, faculty can help ensure that universities remain places where knowledge is not only produced and transmitted but also used to address the complex challenges facing contemporary societies.

Artificial intelligence may change how knowledge is produced and accessed, but the future of higher education will ultimately depend on whether faculty choose to act as stewards of tradition or as architects of a new educational future.

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