

## Universities Are Only Valuable Because We Agree They Are: Higher Education in the Next Five (Years)

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*“If you were shipwrecked on a desert island, what would you prefer, a bag of potatoes or a bag of gold?” ‘Yes, but a desert island isn’t Ankh-Morpork!’ ‘And that proves gold is only valuable because we agree it is, right? It’s just a dream. But a potato is always worth a potato, anywhere’.* – Terry Pratchett, ‘Making Money’.<sup>1</sup>

In the earlier stages of my academic career – now spanning over 30 years – I spent many an hour at open days and other promotional events talking to potential students about what they wanted to study and why. As I would usually be advising on potential opportunities following the successful completion of a generalist business degree, I would invariably conclude with a casual reminder that future employees would usually train new graduates in the specifics of their role, and in that regard a degree qualification principally served to demonstrate a graduate’s ability to learn. My advice - though unpopular among academic colleagues fixated on higher education as a pathway to success in a pre-defined career - was a reminder that the accumulation of knowledge makes learning easier, and that *learning* is what mattered.

Whereas universities were once regarded as places of learning for personal growth, modern students’ perceptions of higher education and the role of universities is one of ‘credentialing’ more so than ‘educating’<sup>2</sup>, and the perceived value of university issued degrees is itself in decline.<sup>3</sup>

In an age when the increasing cost of higher education is a barrier to entry for potential students and where information is effectively free, this short work examines two of the principal services of universities – creating and disseminating knowledge; and credentialing learning, and how both must evolve over the next five years determine universities’ long-term relevance.

### ***Information is ubiquitous, less so wisdom and truth***

Depending on who you read, the world’s earliest universities date back to the late 11th century (University of Bologna)<sup>4</sup>, or as early as the mid-9th century (University of Al-Qaraouiyine)<sup>5</sup>. It was not until the early 13th century however that universities began issuing degrees and not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the first scholarly journals were published and universities began systematically *creating* knowledge rather than just curating it and providing instruction in it.

It was by the process of knowledge creation and controlled dissemination via scholarly publication that universities assumed their self-appointed role as custodians of knowledge. In

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<sup>1</sup> Pratchett (2007, p256)

<sup>2</sup> Nonis and Swift (2001, p74)

<sup>3</sup> <https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/news-and-insights/articles/student-perceptions-of-American-higher-education>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/university>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/life/history/al-qarawiyyin-worlds-oldest-continually-operating-university-was-founded-by-a-muslim-woman>

an age when written information was collected and stored on paper only, access to it and the knowledge contained within was limited to those with the means to acquire it.

The university tradition of knowledge creation – albeit now arguably driven by the aphorism “publish or perish” – continues to the present day. As of 2022, it is calculated that over 5.14 million academic papers are published each year<sup>6</sup>, though estimates widely vary as to how much of the published research is actually read and/or cited. Whilst the advent of digital optical disc data storage in the early 1980’s widened accessibility to information, it was not until the widespread public adoption of the internet beginning in the mid-1990’s that information became ubiquitous and with the advent of the smartphone, portable. In 2024 it is estimated that the total amount of data created and consumed globally on the internet is 149 zettabytes<sup>7</sup> - the equivalent of 74,500,000,000,000,000 pages of standard printed text.

Only one month after concluding his deal to acquire ‘Twitter’ (now ‘X’) in 2022, changes made by Elon Musk to the workforce and policies at the social media platform have arguably seen a significant increase in the level of published mis-information.<sup>8</sup> Citing concerns over censorship of free speech, ‘Meta’ CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced in January 2025 that their social media platforms (including ‘Facebook’ and ‘Instagram’) would cease independent third-party fact-checking.<sup>9</sup>

The ‘DIKW pyramid’<sup>10</sup> is one of a family of models used to describe the hierarchical relationship between Data, Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom wherein effectively information is organised data; knowledge is applied information; and wisdom is the evaluated understanding of knowledge. Often used as a framework for illustrating how data is processed, the DIKW pyramid can also provide useful insight into the present and necessary future role of universities.

Despite universities’ rapid historic evolution from curators to *creators* of knowledge, they effectively still only operate up to and at the ‘Knowledge’ level of the DIKW pyramid, i.e. collecting and organising data, and applying information. We presently live in an age with an over-abundance of data where we are being challenged to decipher the relevant from the trivial. The widened accessibility to information has come with the capability to create new information, and with that mis-information – the latter arguably made even more prevalent with the emergence and growth of generative AI created content. Additionally, the abandonment of independent fact-checking by the largest social media platforms mean we too are being challenged to determine fact from falsehood. To maintain their relevance in an age where knowledge is ubiquitous, and its very creation is being rapidly re-assigned to generative AI, universities must necessarily evolve again to instruct instead in the evaluated understanding of knowledge. Wisdom will be the new value-add, and by training in ‘wisdom’ rather than ‘knowledge’ universities can equip current and future generations of students to critically reflect and make informed judgements about the both relevant and the factual. “Wisdom-generating systems” – to quote from organisational theorist Russell L. Ackoff – “are ones that man will never be able to assign to automata”<sup>11</sup>

### ***Assuring and credentialing learning***

In the formal learning environment of university study where learning is credentialed by means of awarding a degree, assuring that said learning has occurred requires measuring students’ achievement against a set of pre-specified learning outcomes aligned to a program

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<sup>6</sup> <https://wordrated.com/number-of-academic-papers-published-per-year/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/871513/worldwide-data-created/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://healthfeedback.org/misinformation-superspreaders-thriving-on-musk-owned-twitter/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://theconversation.com/meta-is-abandoning-fact-checking-this-doesnt-bode-well-for-the-fight-against-misinformation-246878>

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DIKW\\_pyramid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DIKW_pyramid)

<sup>11</sup> Ackoff (1989, p9)

of study. This is normally achieved via a structured sequence of summative assessments undertaken throughout the student's enrolment in a degree.

Assuring and credentialing the outcomes of informal learning where knowledge is accrued via self-directed learning or experience is however more complex. Informal learning by its very nature is typically unstructured, and hence assurance first requires the level and scope of any accrued knowledge to be determined before the equivalent learning outcomes achieved can be identified and assessed. This typically requires a laborious and individual assessment of a portfolio of evidence constructed by the student; student interviews; and/or independent individual testing of a student's knowledge and skill against pre-determined criteria. The unstructured nature of informal learning may additionally pose a challenge for universities when students' informal learning does not clearly align to their finite set of pre-specified learning outcomes.

In recognising the legislative right of universities to credential learning by means of awarding degrees, employers are in effect permitting universities to bear the cost of assuring learning. Arguably so long as this cost exceeds the potential benefit to employers – namely evidence that a graduate has attained a relevant set of knowledge and/or skills – they [employers] should have little motivation to infringe upon this right. Cost aside, comes a question of relevance. Arguably too, so long as the learning being credentialed meets employers' current needs the right of universities to assure learning and issue credentials should not be infringed upon.

The 2010's saw a shift in the status quo for universities as the introduction and rapid uptake of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and digital badges as a form of certification challenged not only their right to issue credentials, but also how credentials were issued. The trend towards shorter more specialised courses, albeit absent of holistic assurance of learning, allowed providers to be nimbler in their response to the changing needs of the market. Despite being widely recognised by employers – Kent Walker, President of Global Affairs at Google's parent company 'Alphabet' tweeted in July 2020 that Google will treat their 6-month Career Certificates as being equivalent to four-year degrees for related roles<sup>12</sup> – the vast majority of online certifications are not yet formally accredited by regulatory agencies for higher education in most jurisdictions.

From three courses in 2011, there are as at the time of writing over an estimated 250,000 online courses from over 1,500 university and 2,400 non-university providers<sup>13</sup> offering a variety of certifications including micro-credentials and professional certificates. Arguably however the greater threat to universities is not the increased competition from non-university providers, but rather the slow and systematic devaluation of degrees as a form of credentialed learning as micro-credentials and their like gain professional status. Too, as generative artificial intelligence becomes increasingly capable of creating knowledge and aspects of business careers in disciplines including accounting, finance, marketing and HRM face long-term redundancy, we must question if the investment in assuring and credentialing learning via award of a degree – in these disciplines at least – is still valuable.

Amidst the rapid development and uptake of micro-learning, universities must re-think their approach to long-form (i.e. degree) course design, and to the principles and processes underlying their existing methods of assurance of learning. Units – the traditional building blocks of degrees – and the relationships between them within degrees will need to be reimagined; carved into smaller parts again to allow themed micro-learning objects to be easily added and removed as dictated by the needs of the market. This nimbler and more responsive approach to course and unit design will also necessitate a more holistic approach to assessment design and ergo, assurance of learning processes. Project-based assessments that span across multiple units in a degree and which require students to draw

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<sup>12</sup> [https://x.com/Kent\\_Walker/status/1282677443652976642](https://x.com/Kent_Walker/status/1282677443652976642)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.classcentral.com/>

upon various different learnings will become more common. Such assessments will cumulate in a digital portfolio of evidence that assures students' learning across multiple domains, and which students themselves will use to demonstrate their proficiency in their chosen field to potential employers.

Universities must adapt in the next five years and beyond, not only in terms of their instructional design and delivery, but also in how they define and validate credentials; leveraging their competitive advantage in assuring learning. Only so long as they continue to provide services that cannot easily be replicated by non-university providers will we still agree that universities are valuable.

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