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DOI 10.2478/doc-2025-0001

Preface

The University in the World of Spiritual Pursuits Amid Technological Interventions

Received **26 May 2025**

Available online **10 June 2025**

The role of higher education in society has continually shifted between serving the public good and fulfilling private interests, with societal forces playing a decisive role in shaping this dynamic. Universities have always responded to the demands society makes of them from their outset. Early institutions in the 10th and 11th centuries were required to focus on medicine and canon and civil law. In the late 12th century the university of Paris was famous as a center of theological learning. The upheavals brought about by the Reformation of the 16th century affected the universities of Europe in different ways, with universities siding with either traditional Catholic teachings or the new interest in science that the Reformation brought with it. Halle university, founded in 1694, was one of the first to renounce religious orthodoxy of any kind and instead offered

teaching which pursued rational and objective intellectual inquiry. So by the end of the 18th century there was a focus on academic practices which emphasized research, laboratory experimentation and rigorous examination. Consequently, sciences like physics, chemistry, biology and engineering featured in university curricula, and by the early 20th century disciplines such as economics, political science, psychology and sociology were also introduced. Modern languages and their literatures replaced the teaching of the traditional study of Latin and Greek.

However, these trends in European higher education were not uniformly adopted. In the 19th century, for example, only some universities became secularized and eventually state-financed, most notably in Italy, France and Spain. This created a patchwork of direct links between higher education institutions and the societies that they served, which remains to this day. This in turn led to a lack of homogeneity with regards to the fundamental purpose of higher education. In the UK, for instance, universities emerged to meet evolving societal needs from religious instruction in medieval institutions like Oxford and Cambridge to broader access to education in the 19th century, and eventually to supplying skilled labor for an industrial economy. However, this utilitarian view, emphasizing the economic and vocational functions of universities, is challenged by others who champion the importance of a more humanistic rationale. Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1976) famously argued that universities should be devoted to the pursuit of universal knowledge, not merely vocational training.

This dichotomy is evident in the development of higher education in other national contexts. In Poland, the founding of the Jagiellonian University in 1364 by King Casimir III was initially motivated by the need to educate administrators and clergy, reflecting both state and church interests. During the communist era (1945–1989), Polish universities were heavily oriented toward serving state needs, particularly in science and technology, as part of a centrally planned economy (Kwiek, 2001). Since the fall of communism, however, the system has undergone significant marketization, reflecting a shift toward the production of competitive, globally mobile graduates. Yet, as Lenart in this volume argues through his case study of the University of Opole, this transition not only involved economic restructuring but also introduced new existential challenges,

including the marginalization of the humanities and the rise of technological determinism, which threatened to displace the ethical and spiritual missions of universities.

In the United States, the development of higher education has similarly oscillated between public service and privatized benefits. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which created land-grant universities, exemplified a commitment to public purpose by promoting access to practical education in agriculture and engineering. Yet, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, rising tuition fees and student debt have prompted critiques that U.S. higher education increasingly operates as a private investment rather than a public good (Labaree, 1997). Despite this, many institutions still uphold missions of civic engagement, diversity, and social responsibility, indicating that the public/private dichotomy remains complex and contested.

Today this ultimate purpose of higher education is being determined by rapid developments in information technology and the requirement to provide the knowledge and skills the future workforce needs to participate fully in the new global, rather than national economy. In the field of academia, artificial intelligence, neurotechnology, and digital education tools have redefined the way knowledge is researched, created and communicated, with an emphasis on functionality, immediacy, and measurable outcomes. Many view this shift as worrying, arguing that universities have begun to focus on economic goals and market-oriented values, reducing its fundamental purpose to that of a transactional process rather than a transformative one (Bylsma, 2015). As The World Economic Forum points out in their report on higher education (Feb. 2022), we are implementing a system that "certifies knowledge rather than nurtures learning" and argues that this knowledge is "easily-outdated".

Universities today face a wide range of complex, and at times existential, challenges. These include financial pressures related to funding models, the imperative to attract both domestic and international students, and increasing competition from institutions around the world. They must also keep pace with rapid technological change, not only in the subjects they teach but in how courses are designed and delivered. This reflects what might be called

the 'public' dimension of higher education: the question of what universities can do for society.

Simultaniously, there is growing attention to the 'private' dimension: what university can do for the individual. Here, too, we find existential concerns. A recent *eCampus News* article highlighted that "across campuses worldwide, students are grappling with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression". These challenges, the article notes, stem from "the demands of academic rigor, coupled with societal pressures and personal responsibilities". The authors emphasize the urgent need for universities to acknowledge these pressures and to foster a more "supportive and inclusive campus culture". *ECampus News* is a widely read platform that offers information and insights aimed at helping higher education leaders transform their institutions. The site reaches more than 300,000 unique visitors monthly, including over 250,000 registered members, reflecting the scale and urgency of the issues it reports on.

This thematic issue argues that participation in higher education needs to be a holistic experience in which academic and vocational aspects are complemented by cultural, ethical, and spiritual considerations. It questions the current, dominant idea that the fundamental role of universities today is to provide "knowledge for the sake of serving society and knowledge for the sake of serving social demands" (Guttmann, 1987, p. 188). The issue aims to pose the question: "Can and should universities reset the balance and provide spaces for existential reflection, ethical discourse, and increased opportunities for humanistic scholarship?".

A major challenge in this debate is the growing presence and use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT within academic practice. AI offers both functional benefits and profound epistemological challenges. For example, a tool like ChatGPT is capable of producing grammatically coherent and structurally well-organized academic texts, and yet it lacks the rhetorical and dialogical depth and nuance found in purely human-authored work. For instance, research comparing AI-generated and student essays finds that ChatGPT relies more heavily on rigid lexical bundles and abstract phrasing, displaying lower levels of authorial voice, personal engagement, and rhetorical nuance (Jiang & Hyland, 2025a, 2025b, 2024). This distinction is not merely stylistic; the reduction in

interactional metadiscourse, such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and engagement features, signals a mode of communication that, while superficially coherent, lacks the intersubjective resonance necessary for meaningful argumentation. As Jiang and Hyland (2025b) argue, human academic writing is defined by its ability to acknowledge and respond to imagined readers, fostering a dialogic relationship between author and audience. By contrast, ChatGPT-generated texts exhibit what they term "audience blindness", a limitation rooted in the model's statistical, rather than experiential processing of language.

This is just one of the many challenges facing higher education institutions today which have implications for pedagogical practices and perhaps more fundamentally, for the present and future role of such institutions in our societies. If education is increasingly mediated and guided by algorithmic considerations, how do we preserve the distinctiveness of human thought, uniqueness and creativity, and where is the space for the intangibles, spirituality and well-being?

This thematic issue not only reaffirms the need for the spiritual and existential dimensions of academic life but places them in direct conversation with the current realities of the digital revolution. As contributors like Konik, Ruczaj, and Oviedo suggest, recovering the human element, whether through art, theology, or interdisciplinary reflection, is not nostalgic but necessary. It offers a path forward where universities resist becoming dispensers of certification of specific learning outcomes and instead cultivate holistic, ethical and dialogically attuned scholars.

These questions build directly on the themes explored in issue 21 of this journal, "Spirituality in Scholarship", which foregrounded the exclusion of spiritual perspectives from many of today's higher education programs. That volume challenged the epistemological dominance of positivism and offered instead a model of scholarship that embraces reflexivity, affect, identity, and meaning. As Lehman and Canagarajah noted in their co-authored preface, "Doing and reporting research in global academia, located in the Anglophone 'centre', often excludes considerations of the role of diversity and spirituality in scholarship" (p. 9, 2024). Their call was taken up in Shepard Wong's (2024) seminal article "Scholars as spiritual beings", which articulated five trajectories through which spirituality and scholarship intersect: vertical,

outward, horizontal, inward, and multidimensional. These frameworks helped conceptualize spirituality not as a supplemental concern but as a central mode of scholarly inquiry and identity formation.

The current volume extends and deepens this inquiry by examining the university itself as a site where technological, institutional, and spiritual forces contend. The contributions reflect a broad spectrum of disciplinary perspectives from philosophy and theology to cultural studies and aesthetics, and point to the urgent need for higher education to resist reductive paradigms and strive to provide society with knowledgeable and skilled citizens who are also able to contribute to their communities in a more holistic way.

The volume opens with epistemological and anthropological inquiries that seek to expand the foundations of human understanding. Alexandru Casian explores the philosophical and anthropological development of *Einfühlung* ("feeling into"), tracing its intellectual lineage from Herder to Franz Boas. He argues that this overlooked concept deepens our understanding of culture, empathy, and personal identity, offering a valuable epistemological tool for interdisciplinary scholarship.

Building on this exploration of cultural and humanistic frameworks, Antony Hoyte-West provides a comparative study of online postgraduate humanities education at Scotland's ancient universities. His findings show how these institutions are navigating the digital shift while maintaining their humanistic roots, suggesting that adaptation and tradition need not be at odds, and that digitalization can support renewal rather than decline.

Continuing this focus on cultural literacy and public engagement, Essam Eid Abu Gharbiah turns to the visual language of poetic graffiti in Saudi Arabia's "Ithra" Library. His cultural reading of Arabic inscriptions demonstrates how aesthetic literacy can animate public spaces with intellectual and spiritual resonance, reframing libraries as sites of cultural vitality.

Shifting toward the intersection of theology, secularization, and institutional identity, Lluís Oviedo makes a compelling case for reintegrating theology into the academic mainstream. He contends that the current crisis in the humanities is inseparable from the decline of spiritual discourse, and argues that theology,

far from being dogmatic, provides a resilient ethical and existential framework for modern academia.

In a complementary reflection, Mirosław Lenart examines the evolution of the University of Opole in post-communist Poland as a microcosm of broader academic transformations. He warns that while ideological constraints may have been lifted, technological determinism and market forces now pose new existential risks. His call is for universities to reclaim their ethical, interdisciplinary, and humanistic missions before becoming indistinguishable from corporate research centres.

The theme of technology and human creativity is then taken up by Roman Konik, who poses the provocative question: must art be created by humans? Arguing that AI lacks the intentionality and symbolic depth of human expression, Konik defends the enduring significance of the human spirit in authentic artistic creation.

Delving deeper into the dialogue between science and spirituality, Stanisław Ruczaj addresses the perceived conflict between theological and cognitive-scientific understandings of Christian faith. Drawing on both Augustine and contemporary theological insights, he proposes a reconciliatory model in which divine grace operates through natural processes, bridging empirical inquiry and spiritual belief.

The volume closes with Antony Hoyte-West's review of Iga Maria Lehman's monograph *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: The Critique of Texts*. He praises the work for its timely critique of leadership discourse and its contribution to the broader conversation about human agency, institutional authority, and the ideological dimensions of academic language.

Together, these essays explore how the university might once again become a space for the cultivation of the soul as well as the intellect, a forum where spirituality and science, art and algorithm, tradition and innovation can engage in meaningful dialogue. In doing so, this issue extends the project initiated in issue 21, not only to reintegrate spirituality into scholarly discourse but to rethink the institutional and epistemological structures that shape what counts as knowledge in the first place.

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Warsaw, May 2025

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