

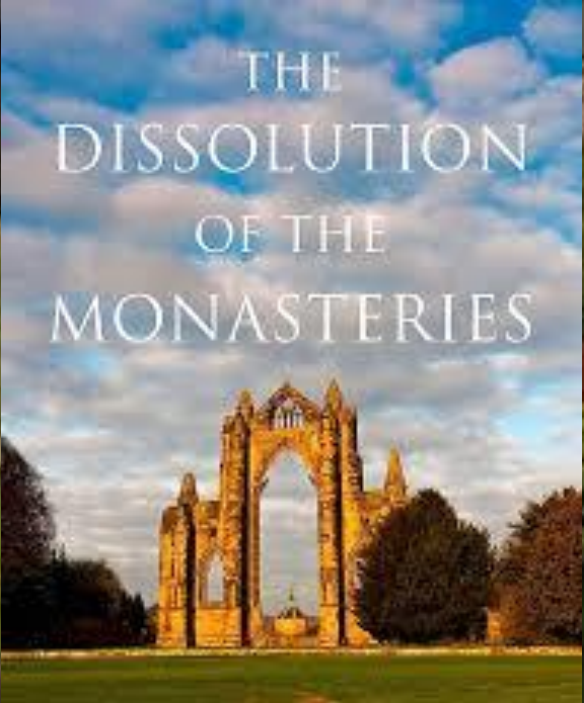
How can universities drive change for the common good?

Geoff Mulgan
EWUU, Eindhoven, April 2026





?

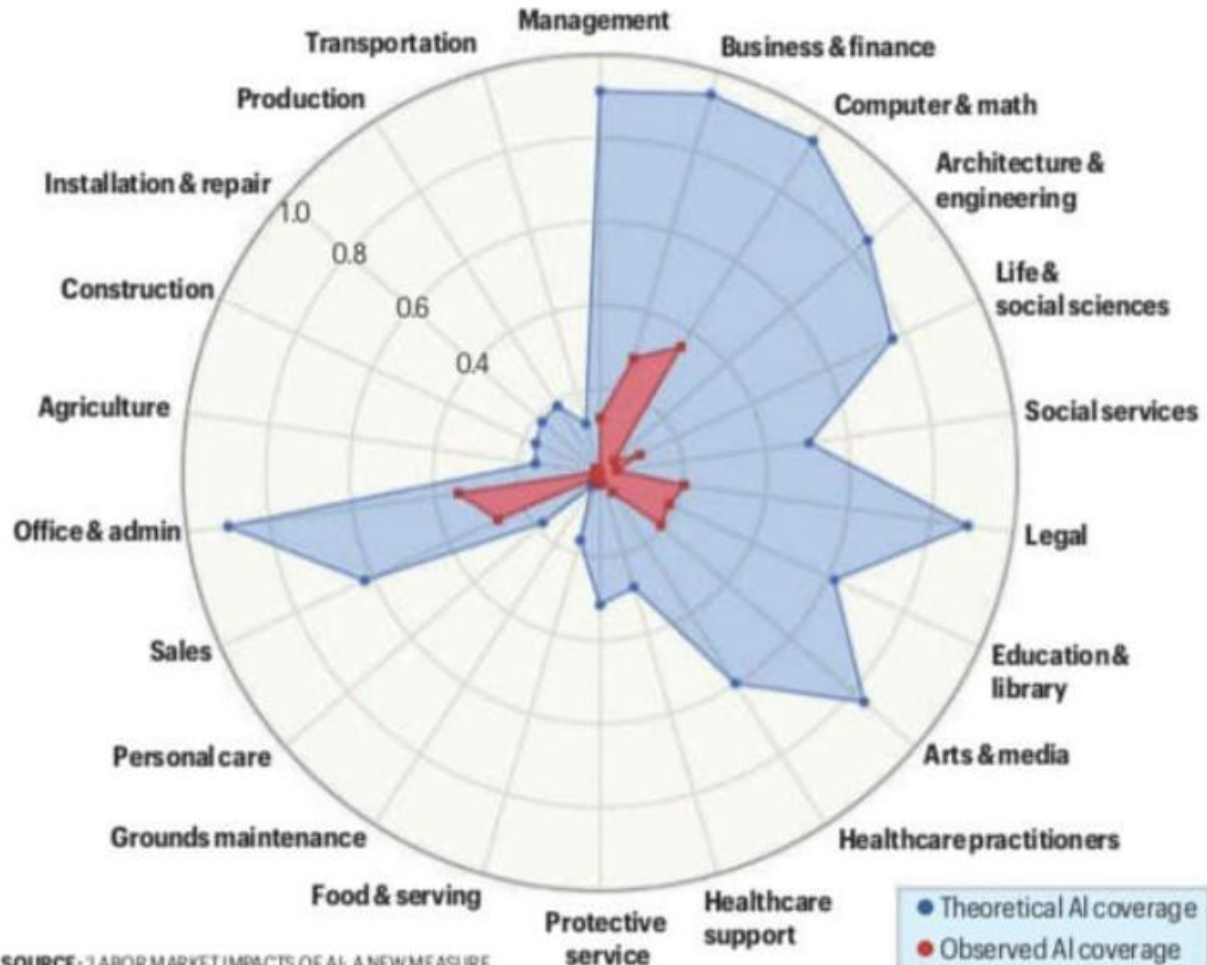


THE
DISSOLUTION
OF THE
MONASTERIES

50 years of extraordinary growth

- Student numbers: 13m in 1960, 264m in 2025
- Money: turnover around \$1trn, vast capital & research budgets
- 1900: 1000 universities, 1950: 2500, in 2025: 50,000+
- From small minorities to 50+%
- From secluded places to reshaping cities
- A large part of export earnings
- Mega universities with 100k students (ASU, Texas, Anadolu...)

• Which sectors are most at risk from AI?



SOURCE: LABOR MARKET IMPACTS OF AI: A NEW MEASURE AND EARLY INDICES OF FUTURE TRENDS

“Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won’t survive”

Peter Drucker, 1997

- **Woke, elitist, out of touch, self-serving, overpaid leaders, failing to deliver for graduates, doubtful societal contribution?...**



Change in graduate earnings premium and graduate share of workforce, 1997-2022

Graduate earnings premium (%)



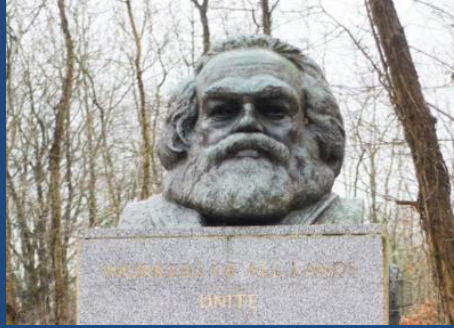
Source: FT analysis of the Luxembourg Income Study. Graduate earnings premium = annual earnings of people with tertiary education vs average with secondary education

FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @burnmurdoch

How to renew the social contract?



1. Universities in social imagination and exploration



THE PHILOSOPHERS HAVE ONLY
INTERPRETED THE WORLD IN
VARIOUS WAYS - THE POINT
HOWEVER IS TO CHANGE IT

	Incremental	Radical
Diagnosis		
Prescription		

	Incremental	Radical
Diagnosis	1. Analysis of present and past social phenomena within existing frames, disciplines, data sources	2. Critique and critical theory, commentary, academic Marxism and post-Marxism
Prescription	3. Near-term policy options and guidance to governments and professions	4. Medium to long-term options for societies, economies and global governance





**Social science as
interpretation *and*
design**



Why is Quadrant 4 so empty...

- Disciplines policing their boundaries?
- Peer review blocking innovation (where's the evidence?)
- Incentives and funding?
- Futures field dominated by people without disciplinary knowledge?
- Fear of politics?

The exploratory social science we're missing

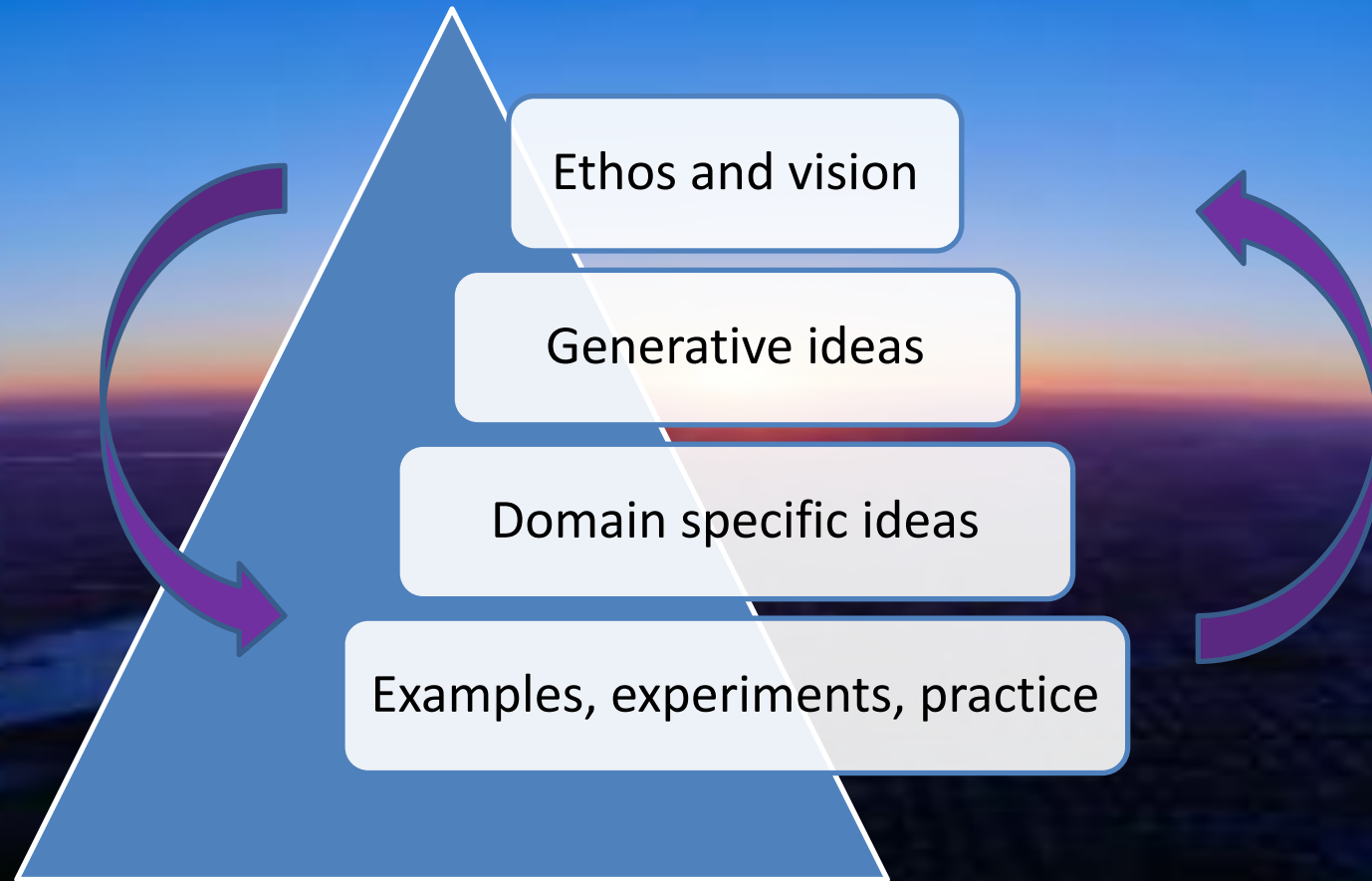


Maquettes/designs/mock-ups – of future care systems, democracy, economy, 10-50 years into the future

Created by transdisciplinary teams using a wide mix of methods for exploration, including design methods, models, digital twins, lived experience

Assessed according to coherence, alignment with evidence, creativity, pathways to implementation

The architecture of thick and thin social imagination



What ... could care look like in 2050?



- Assistive technologies
- AI coaches and companions
- Mutual support in street/neighbourhood
- New home designs
- Alternative funding, insurance models
- Social prescribing in future variants
- Emphasis on socialising
- Intelligence for care systems (data, evidence, tacit knowledge)

What if... democracy was redesigned for the 21st century?

- Citizens assemblies
- Deliberative juries
- Multi-level participatory budgeting
- Quadratic voting
- AI Poli.s and other LLMs
- AI-powered parliaments
- Society-wide conversations
- Electoral integrity institutions
- Laws on political truth
- Educational curricula focused on misinformation, active citizenship



How It Works

The vTaiwan process consists of four successive stages - proposal, opinion, reflection and legislation - supported by a selection of collaborative open source engagement tools.

Stage:

- Proposal Stage
- ▒ Opinion Stage
- ▓ Reflection Stage
- Legislation Stage

The flowchart illustrates the vTaiwan process. It starts with 'Issue' (Proposal Stage) leading to 'Qualify issue' (Opinion Stage) and 'Stakeholder discovery' (Opinion Stage). 'Qualify issue' leads to 'Produce content digestible by stakeholders' (Opinion Stage), which then leads to 'Reach out to the public' (Opinion Stage). 'Stakeholder discovery' leads to 'Invite stakeholders through rolling questionnaires' (Opinion Stage), which then leads to 'Identify affected and knowledgeable people' (Opinion Stage). 'Reach out to the public' leads to 'Face to face dialogue' (Reflection Stage), which then leads to 'Transcript' (Reflection Stage). 'Identify affected and knowledgeable people' leads to 'Formalized consensus' (Legislation Stage). 'Face to face dialogue' leads to 'Comment curation' (Reflection Stage), which then leads to 'Formalized consensus' (Legislation Stage). 'Transcript' leads to 'Formalized consensus' (Legislation Stage). 'Formalized consensus' leads to 'Formalized consensus' (Legislation Stage). The process is supported by tools like Hackpad, Slideshare, Typeform, Discourse, GitBook, and others.

vTaiwan

rethinking democracy
vTaiwan is an experiment that prototypes an open consultation process for the entire society to engage in rational discussion on national issues.

About

Things I Can Do

Cases: A Few Accomplishments

How It Works

INSTITUTIONS AS A FUNDAMENTAL CAUSE OF LONG-RUN GROWTH

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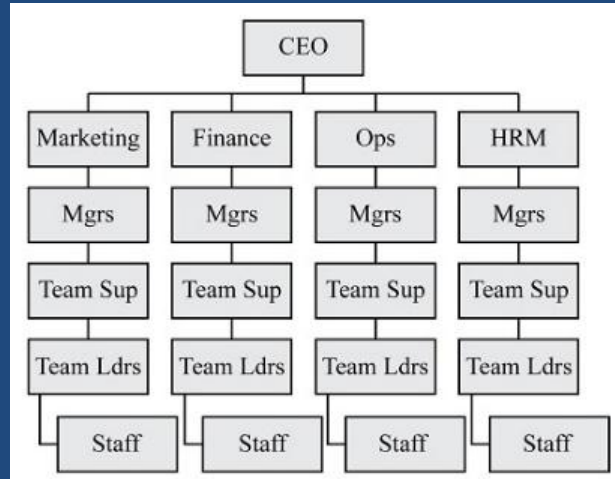
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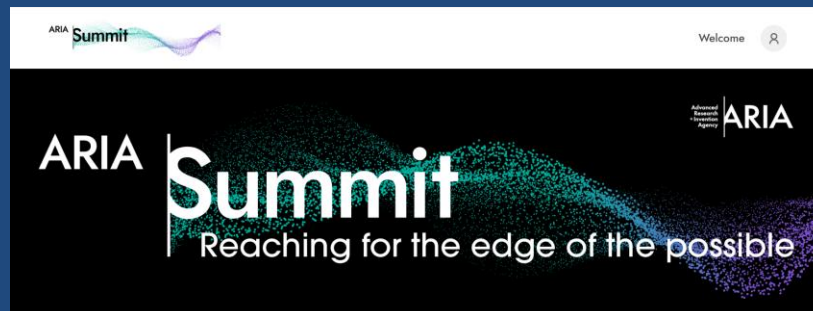
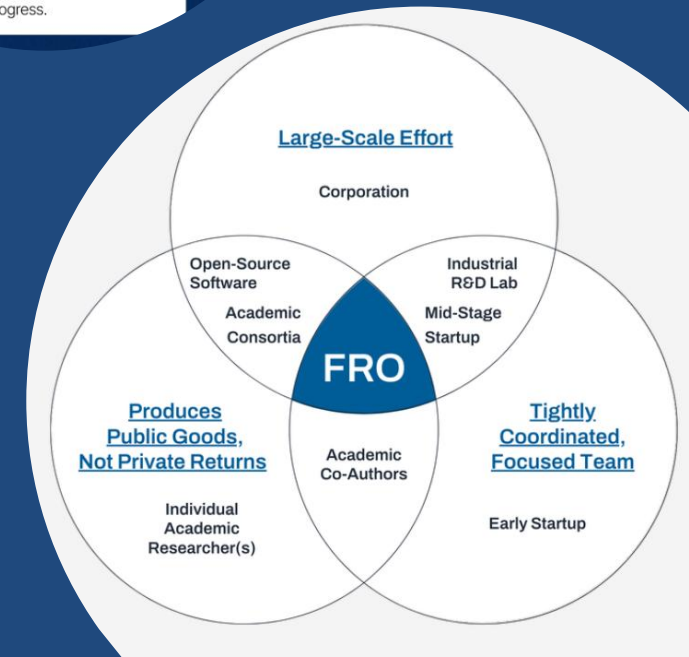


What ... should public institutions look like in the age of TikTok, Google, Nvidia, Airbnb, Wikipedia, DAOs?



Focused research organisations as a parallel?

- '... to produce high-impact public goods to dramatically accelerate progress in key areas of science and technology.
- Led by a full-time founding team of 10 to 30 (or possibly more) scientists, engineers, and operational staff.
- As they near completion, try to disseminate and deploy the public goods they create into the real world...'



2. Challenge based models



Open FIESTA

Open Faculty for Innovation, Education, Science, Technology and Art, Tsinghua University



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The challenge-driven university: How real-life problems can fuel learning

A paper exploring the rise of challenge-driven university models.

04 March 2016 | In [Education](#) | [Futurescoping](#) | 1 min read



Geoff Mulgan



Oscar Townsley



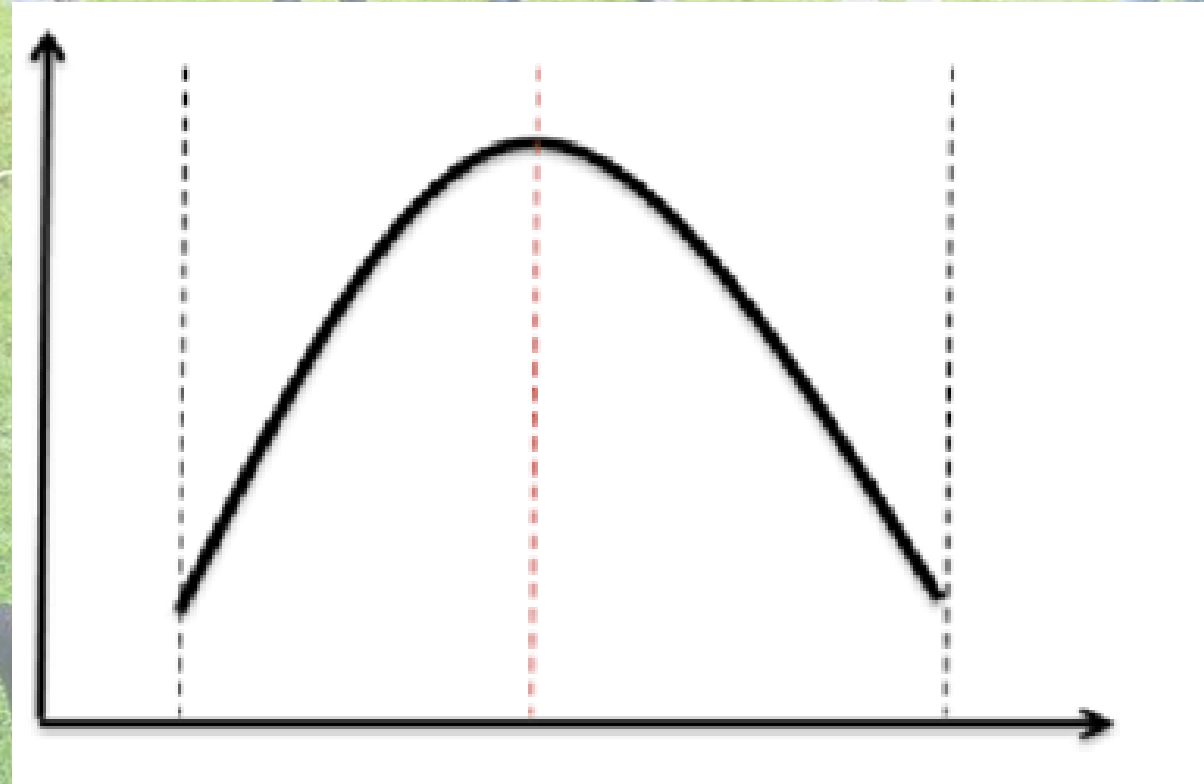
Adam Price

CHALLENGE Based Learning



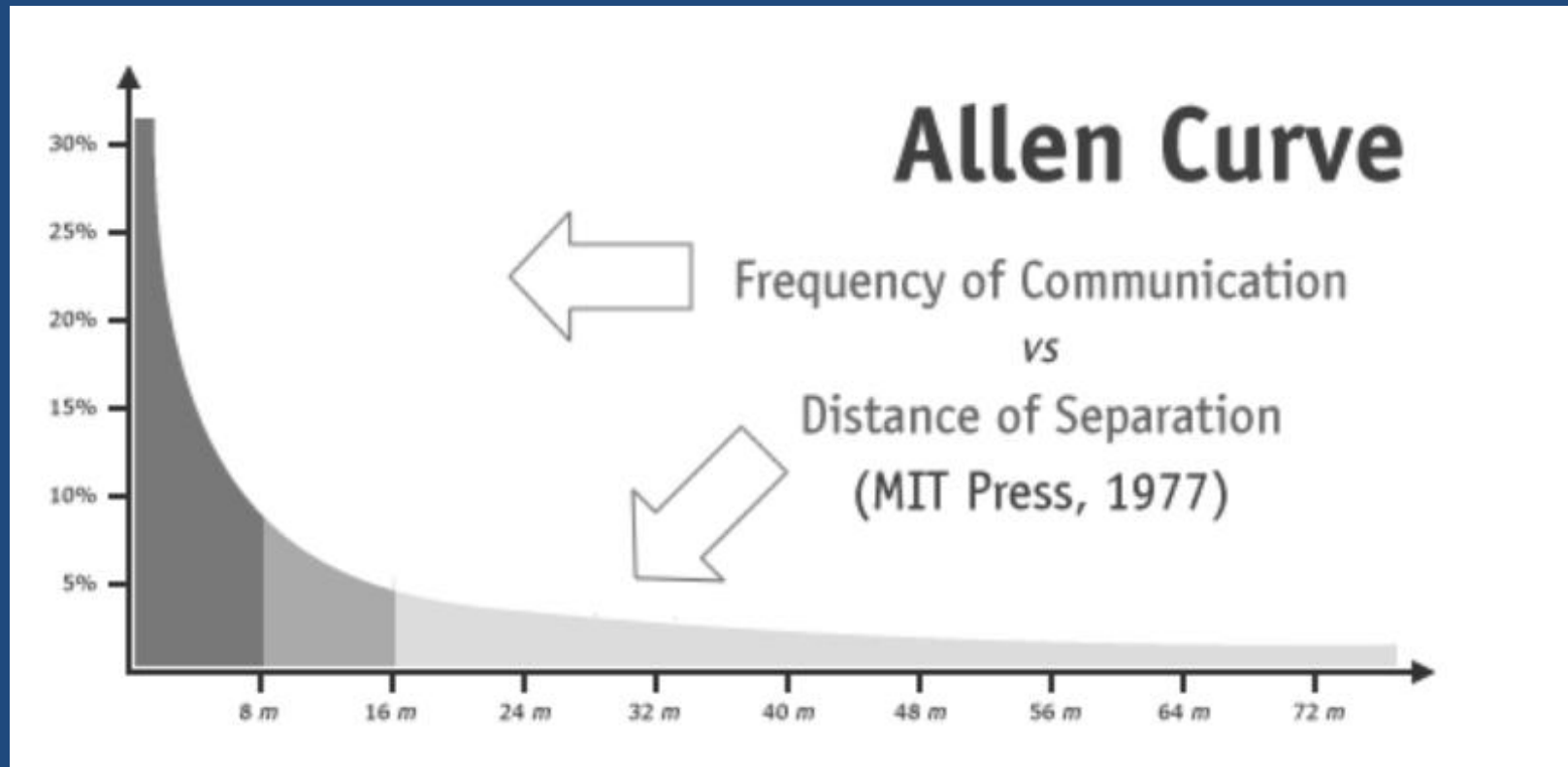
3. Collaboration, place shaping and innovation districts

Collaboration is good but ...



Performance

Extent of collaboration

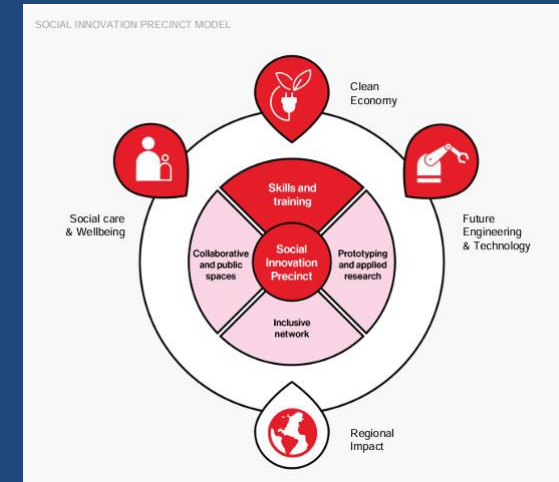
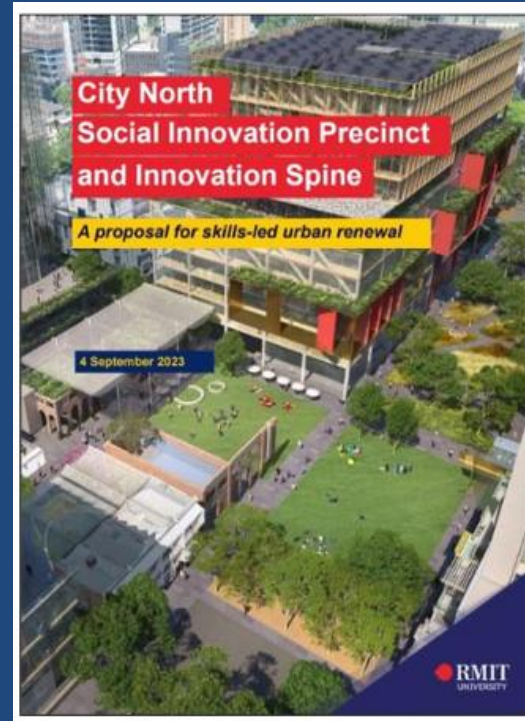


Someone sitting two metres away from you four times more likely to talk to you regularly than someone sitting twenty metres away. People working on different floors were unlikely ever to interact with you and people in separate buildings would probably never be encountered at all.

-

- Cesar Hidalgo: knowledge flows 150 times more between direct collaborators and 16 times more through common connections than between strangers. Physical proximity matters not because distance itself constrains knowledge, but because professional and social networks tend to be embedded in space.

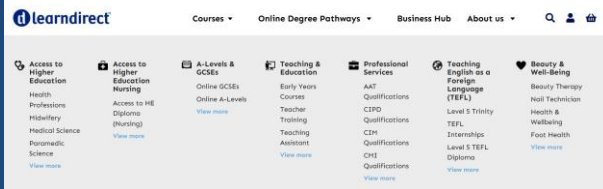




4. Lifelong learning



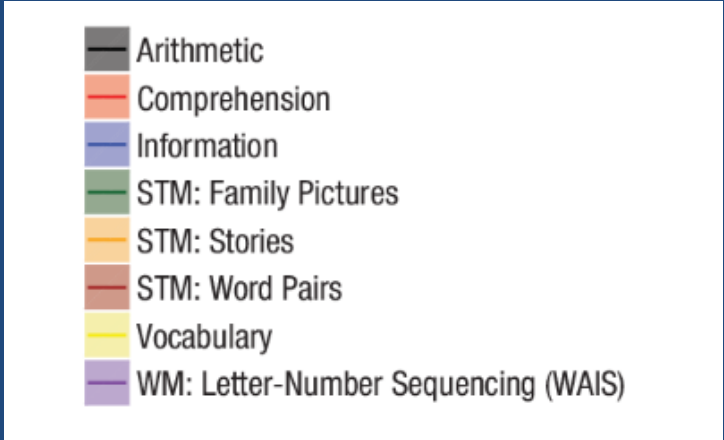
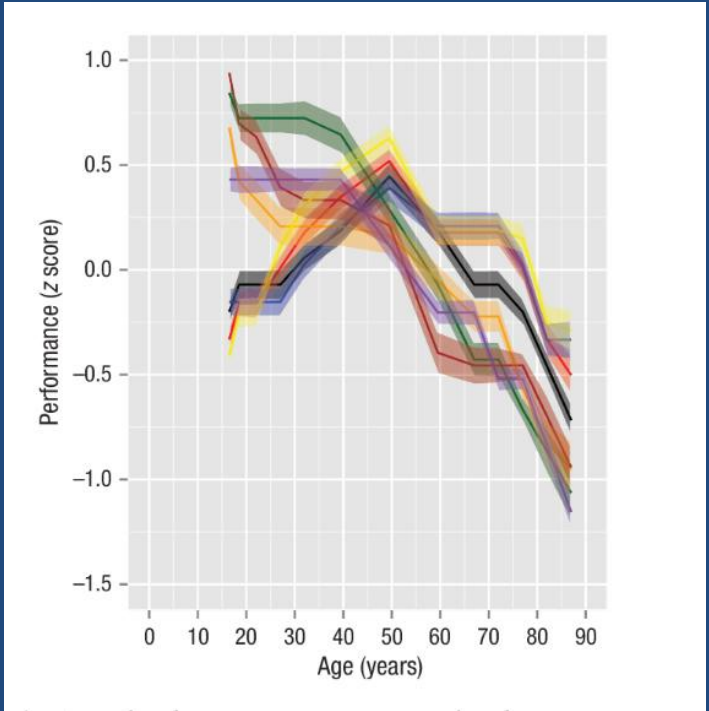
OU: 200,000 students, Learn Direct:
500,000 students at its peak: 4.5m in total,
U3A: 400,000 members in 1,000 local
groups



How big a role for universities? Will the
traditional degree at 18-21 survive? Will
universities be able to adapt to LLL that's
discontinuous, hybrid? What role for
learning credits, entitlements,
microcredentials?



The rise and fall of cognitive abilities across the lifespan



From: Chapter 2: The Rise of the Silver Economy: Global Implications of Population Aging. In: International Monetary Fund. Research Dept.. *World Economic Outlook, April 2025*. International Monetary Fund; 2025.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400289583.081.CH002>

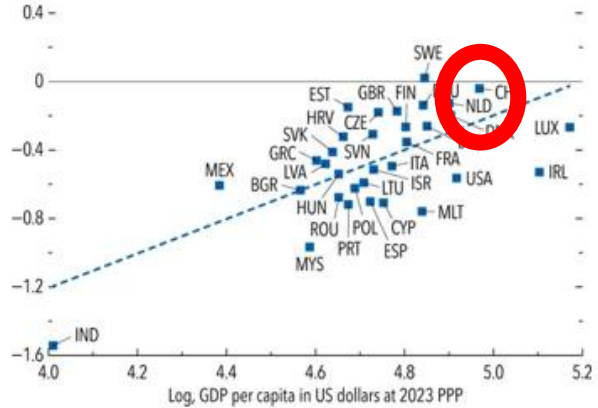
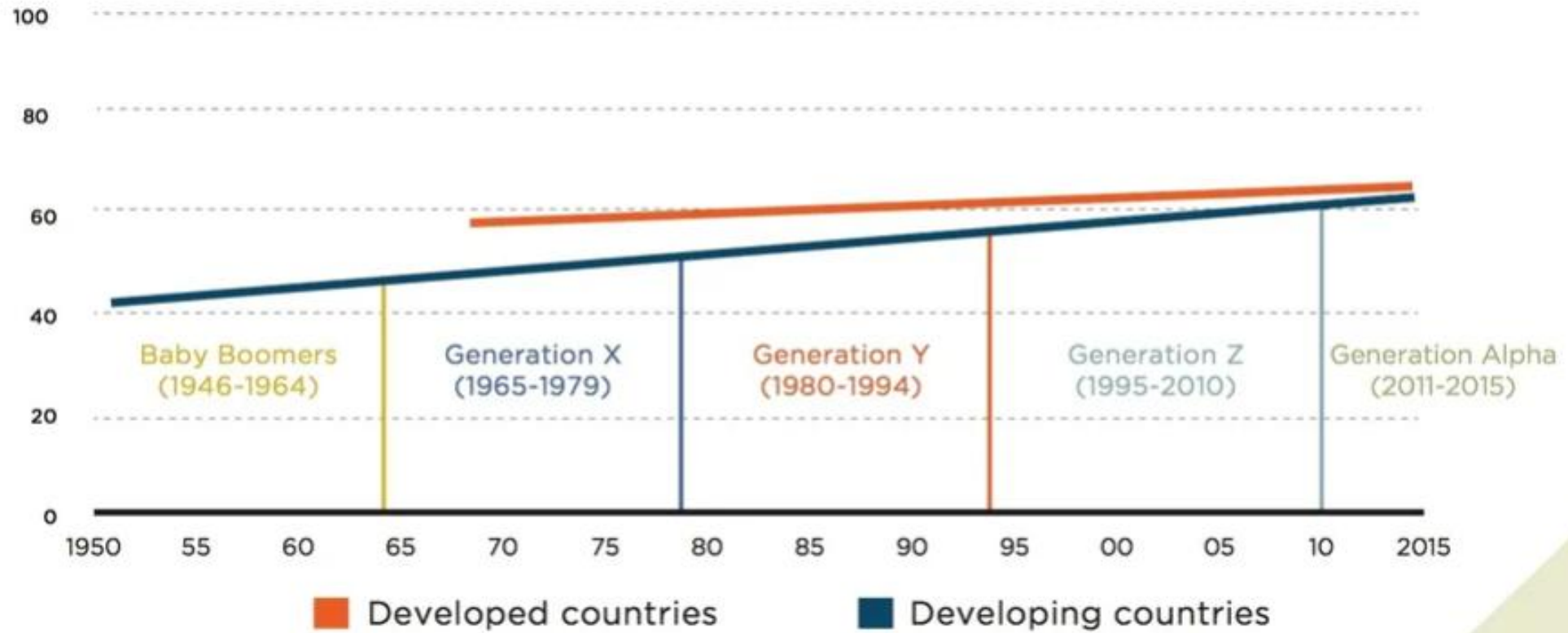


Figure 2.5. Cognitive Capacity (Regression estimates, cognitive health score, country fixed effects)



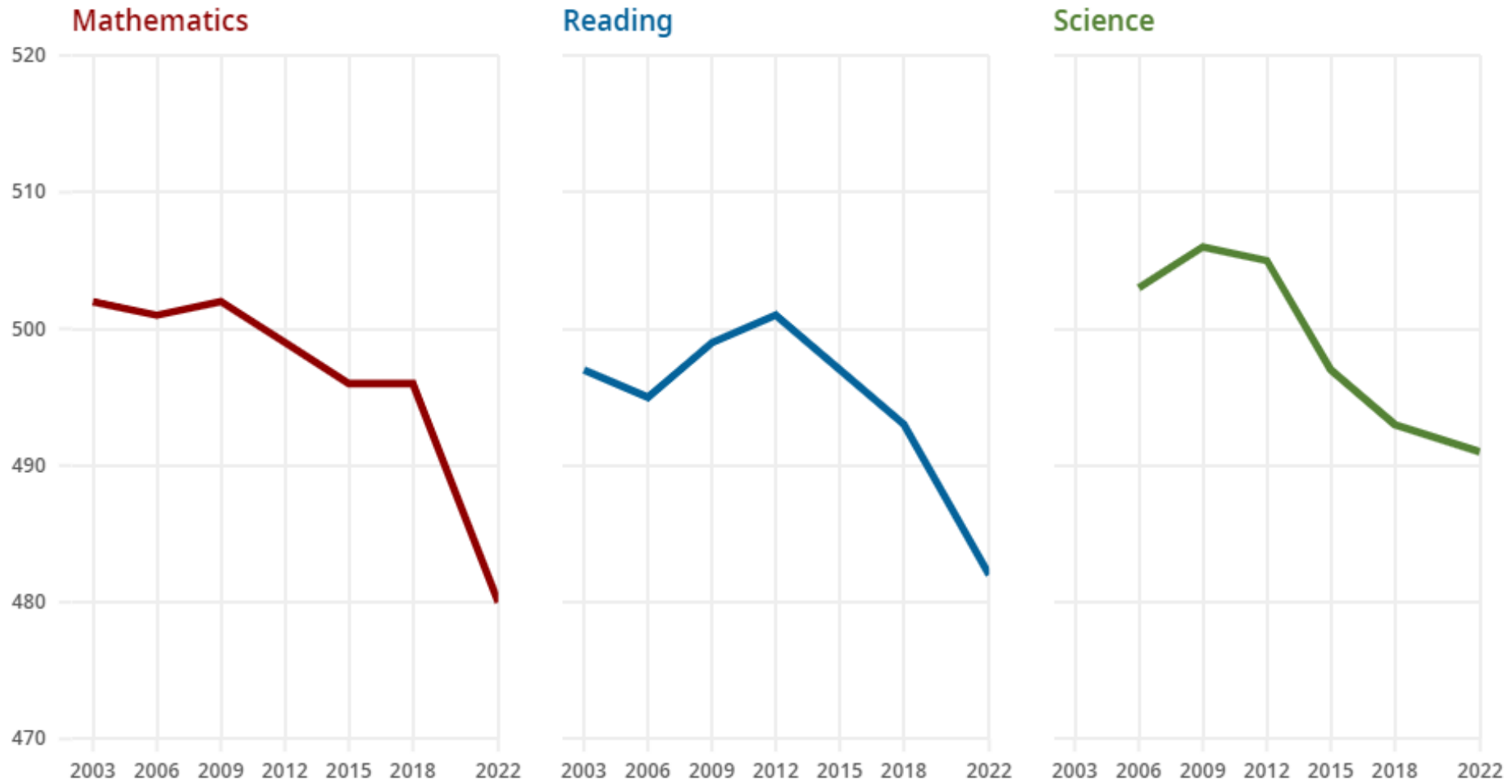
THE FLYNN EFFECT

Improved worldwide IQ test performance



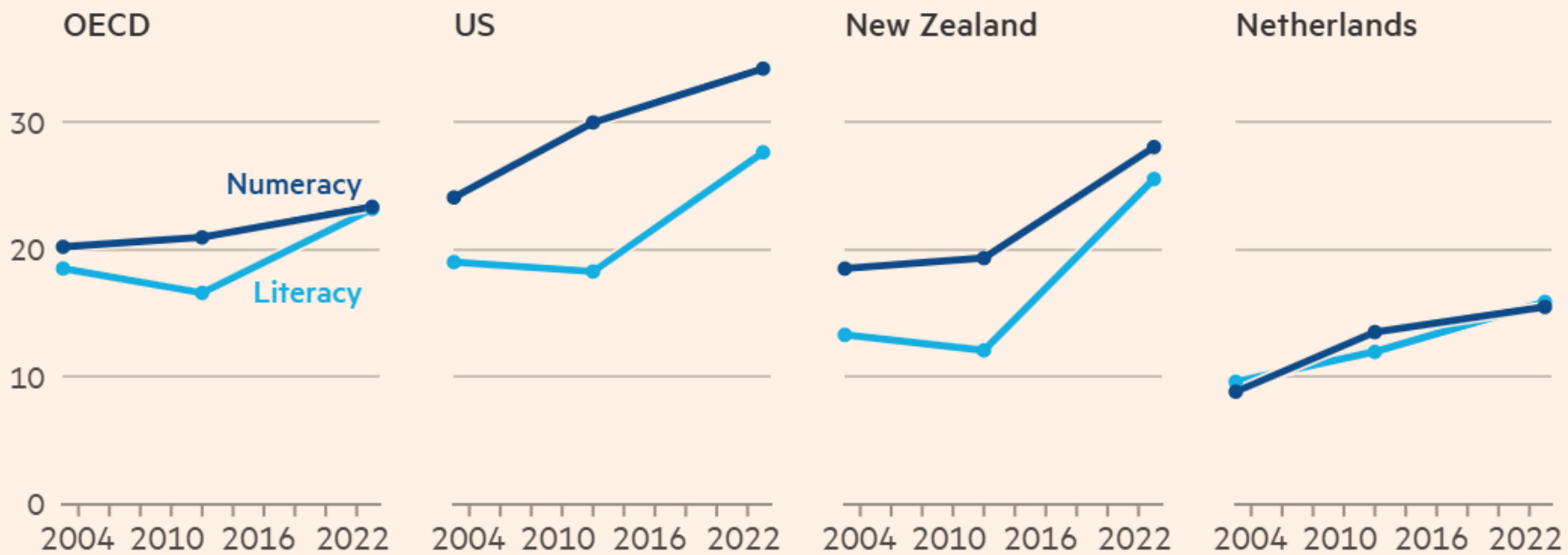
Source: McCrindle Research, 2012. Generations Defined
BBC World Service, 2015. Are humans getting cleverer?

PISA test scores, OECD average



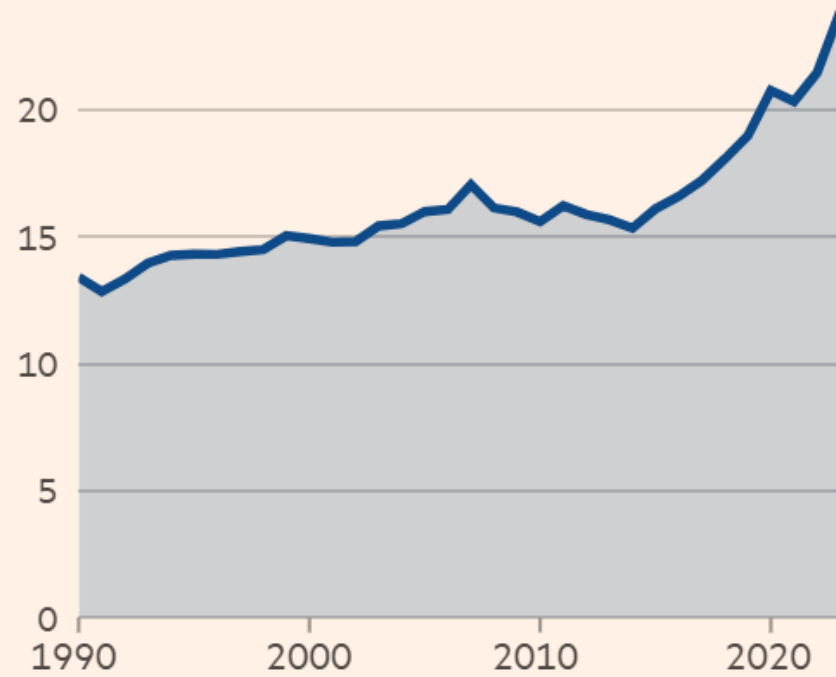
The share of adults who struggle to process information is rising

Share of adults with only basic numeracy or literacy proficiency* (%)

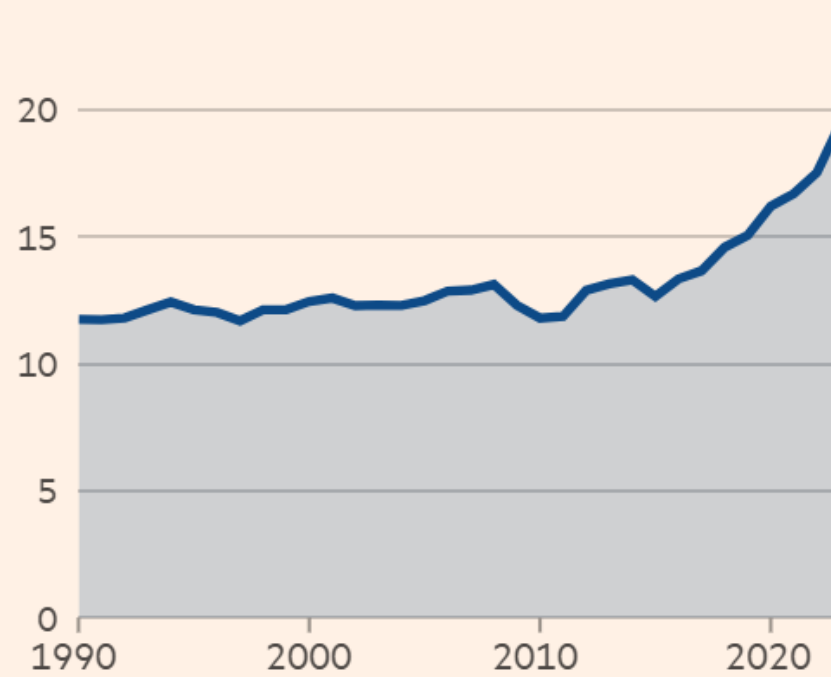


Share of US 18-year-olds who report particular issues on at least 5 of the past 30 days (%)

Difficulty thinking or concentrating



Trouble learning new things



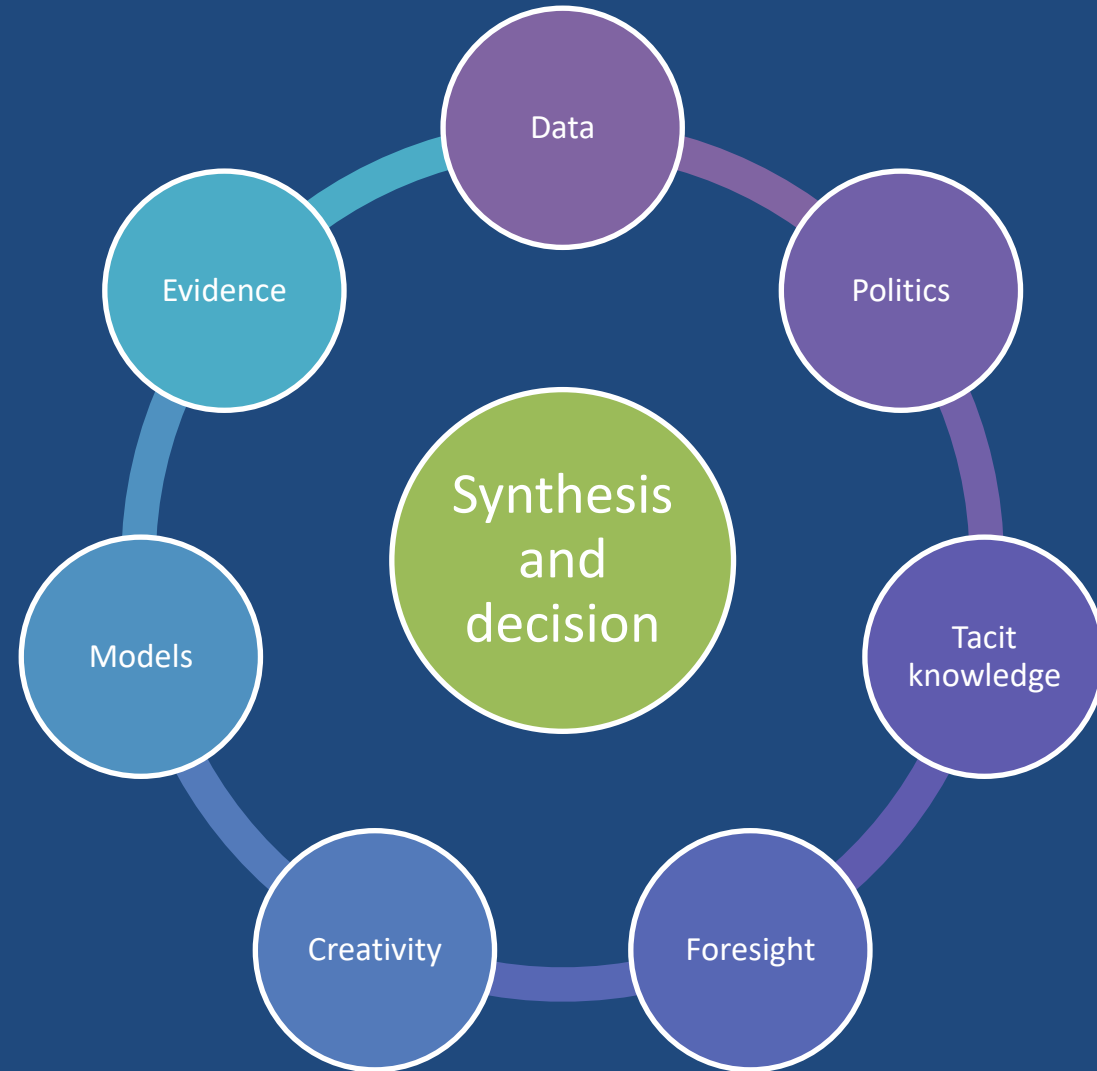
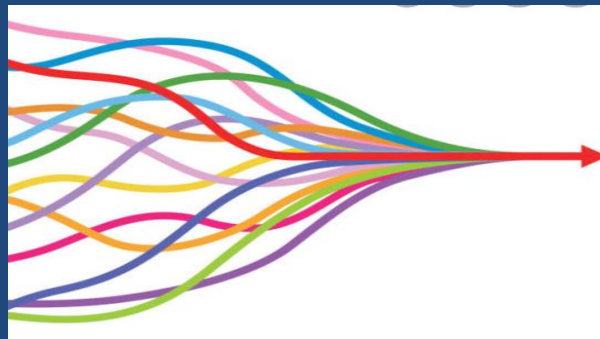
Source: FT analysis of Monitoring the Future survey

FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @jburnmurdoch

©FT

5. *Synthesis*

From interdisciplinarity to synthesis: what is to be done?





The background is a complex, abstract digital landscape. It features a dark blue, textured surface that resembles a grid or a mesh of particles, with several prominent, glowing orange and yellow spots that look like data points or stars. The overall effect is one of a dynamic, interconnected network or data space.

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