

Reinventing the social contract: the roles of Universities in our shared collective intelligence and exploration

Geoff Mulgan
EWUU, Eindhoven, April 2026



CONFERENCE 2026

DRIVING TRANSITIONS

In Society, With Society

TU/e EINDHOVEN
UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY



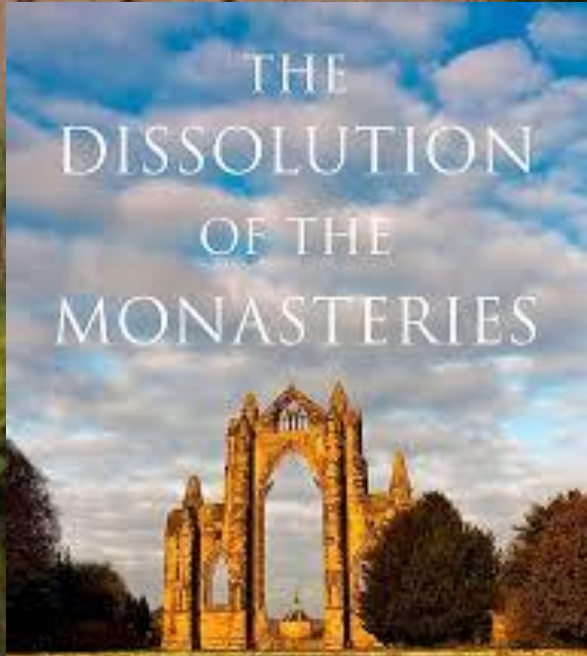
WAGENINGEN
UNIVERSITY & RESEARCH



Utrecht
University



UMC Utrecht




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...)

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

Peter Drucker, 1997

- 
- A photograph of Donald Trump, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and red tie, looking upwards and to the left. He is positioned in the foreground on the right side of the frame. In the background is a large, classical-style brick building with a prominent portico supported by white columns and a pediment with a semi-circular window. The sky is overcast.
- 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 (%)



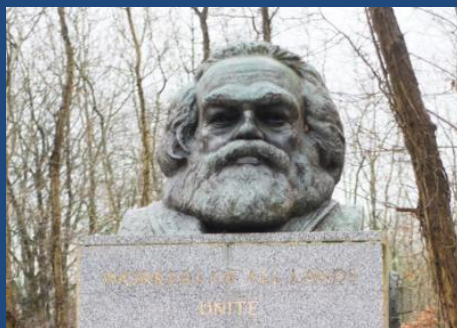
Source: FT analysis of the Luxembourg Income Study. Graduate earnings premium = annual earnings of people with tertiary education vs average with secondary education

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

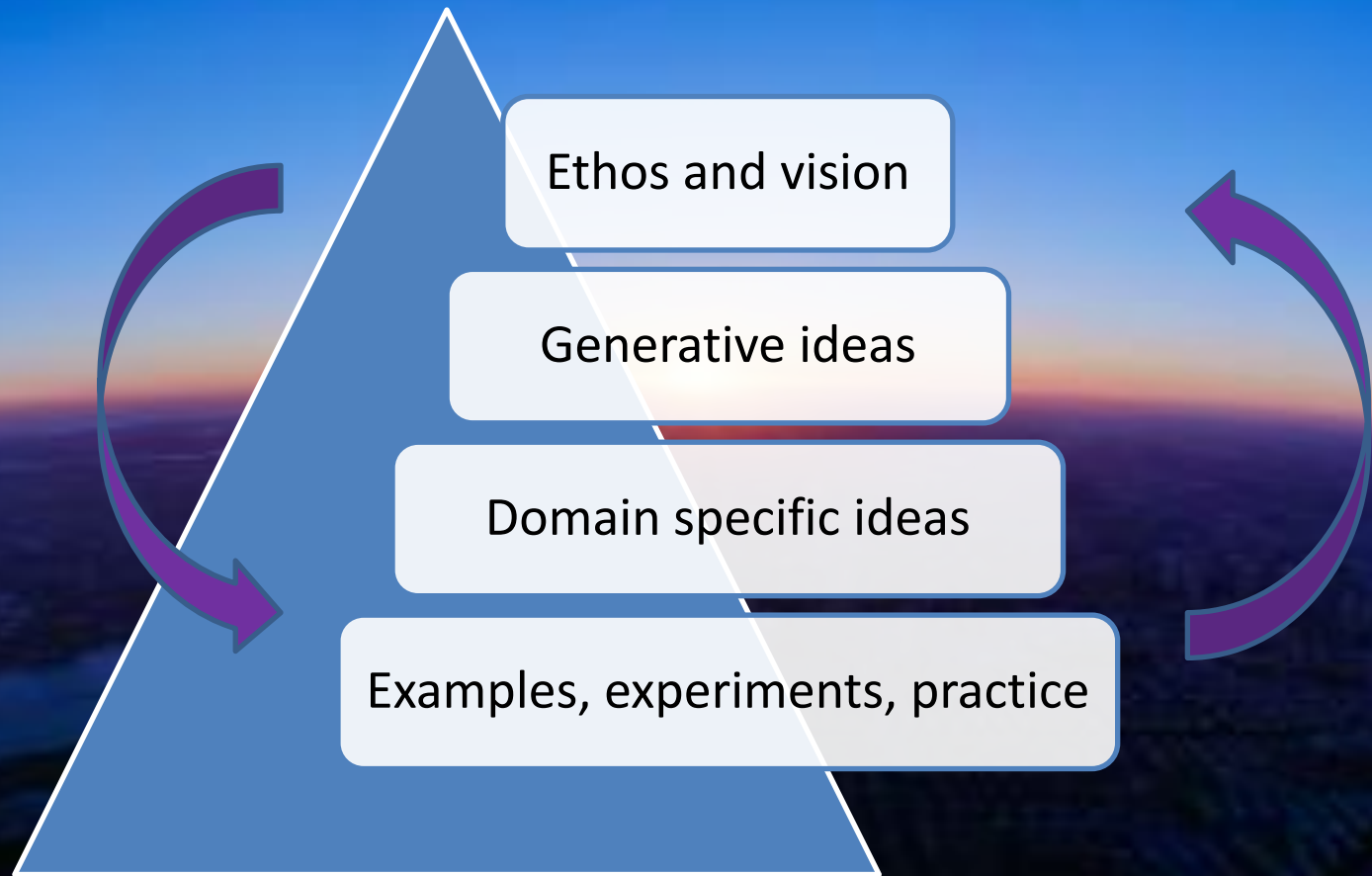




**Social science as
interpretation *and*
design**



The architecture of thick and thin social imagination



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

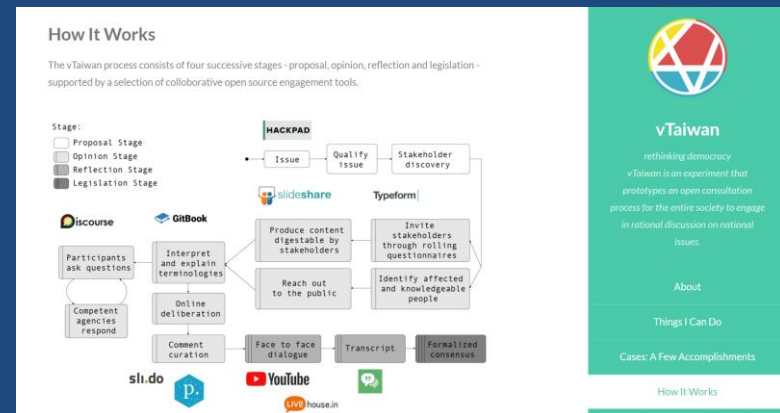
What ... could care look like in 2050?



- 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



INSTITUTIONS AS A FUNDAMENTAL CAUSE OF LONG-RUN GROWTH

DARON ACEMOGLU

Department of Economics, MIT, 50 Memorial Drive E52-380b, Cambridge, MA 02142
e-mail: daron@mit.edu

SIMON JOHNSON

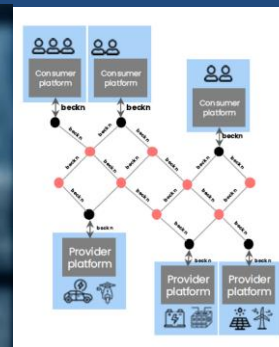
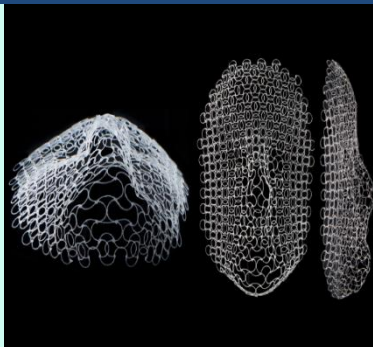
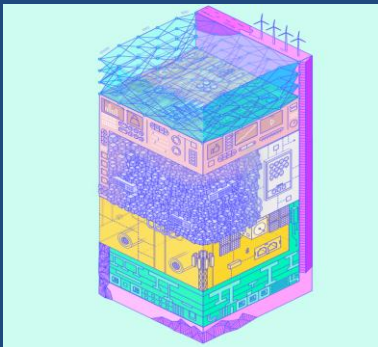
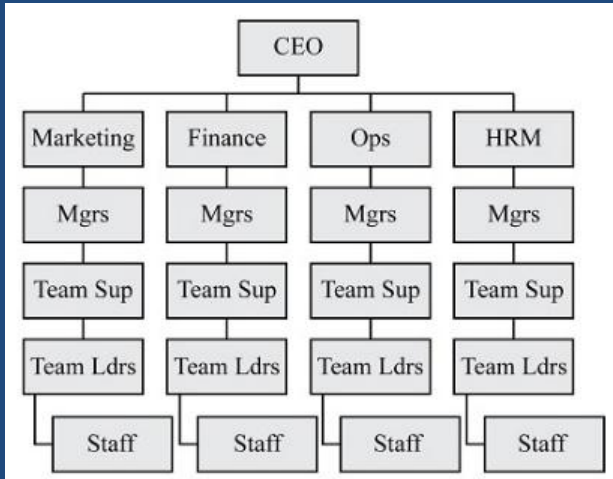
Sloan School of Management, MIT, 50 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA 02142
e-mail: sjohnson@mit.edu

JAMES A. ROBINSON

Department of Government, WCFIA, Harvard University, 1033 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138
e-mail: jrobinson@gov.harvard.edu

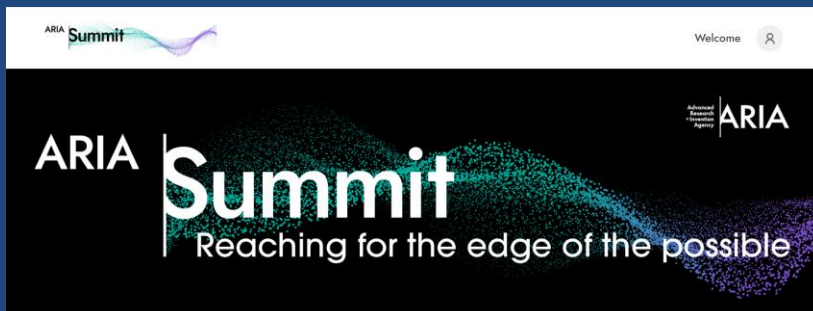
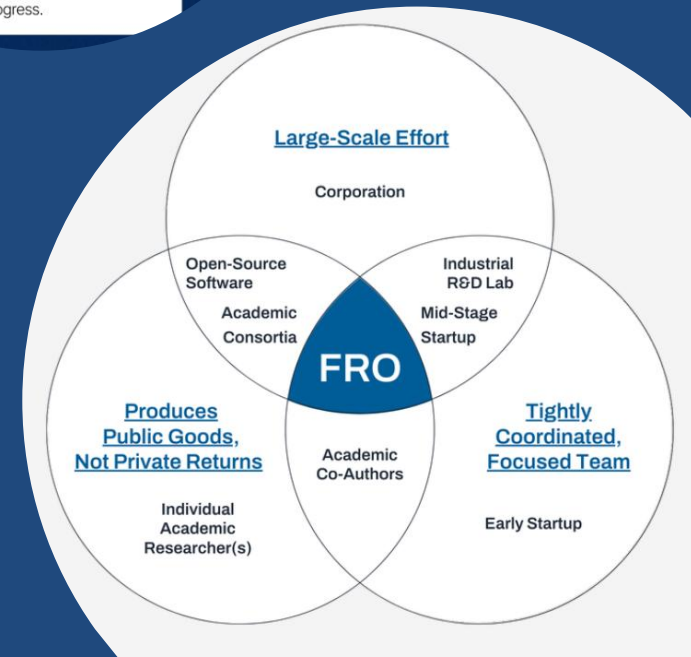


What ... should public institutions look like in the age of TikTok, Google, Nvidia, Airbnb, Wikipedia, DAOs?



Focused research organisations as a parallel?

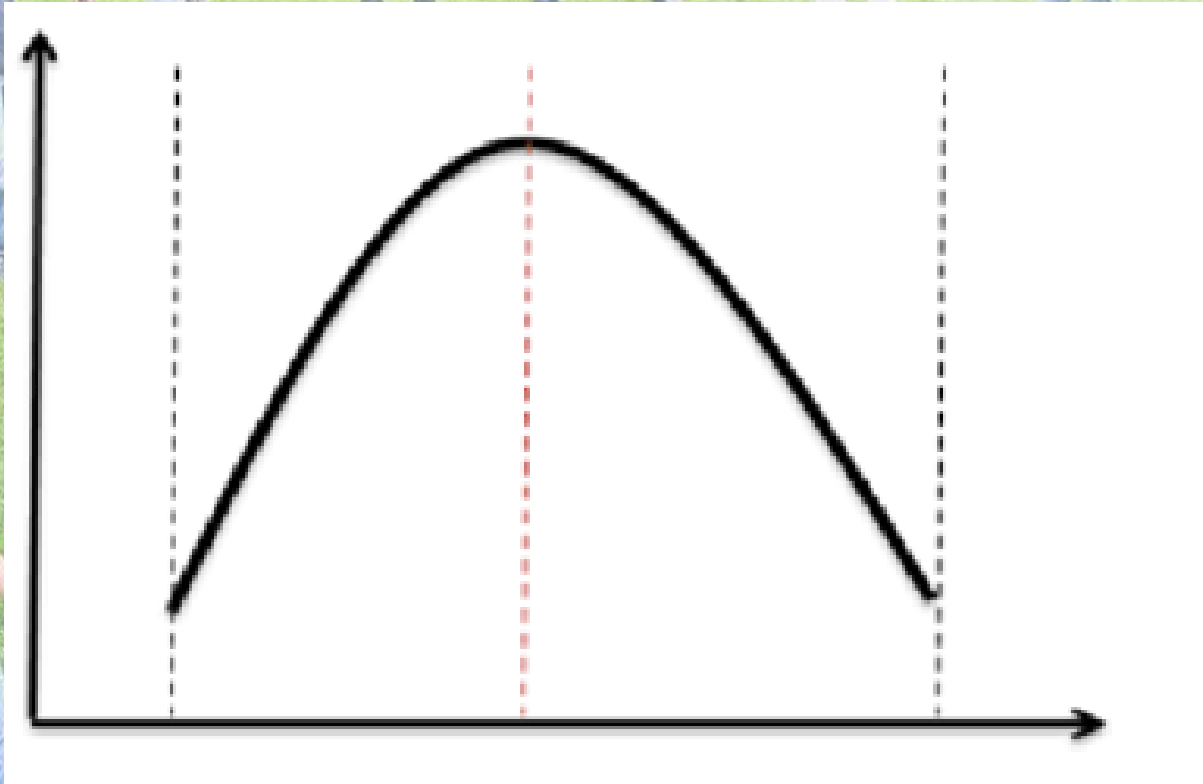
- '... to produce high-impact public goods to dramatically accelerate progress in key areas of science and technology.
- Led by a full-time founding team of 10 to 30 (or possibly more) scientists, engineers, and operational staff.
- As they near completion, try to disseminate and deploy the public goods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



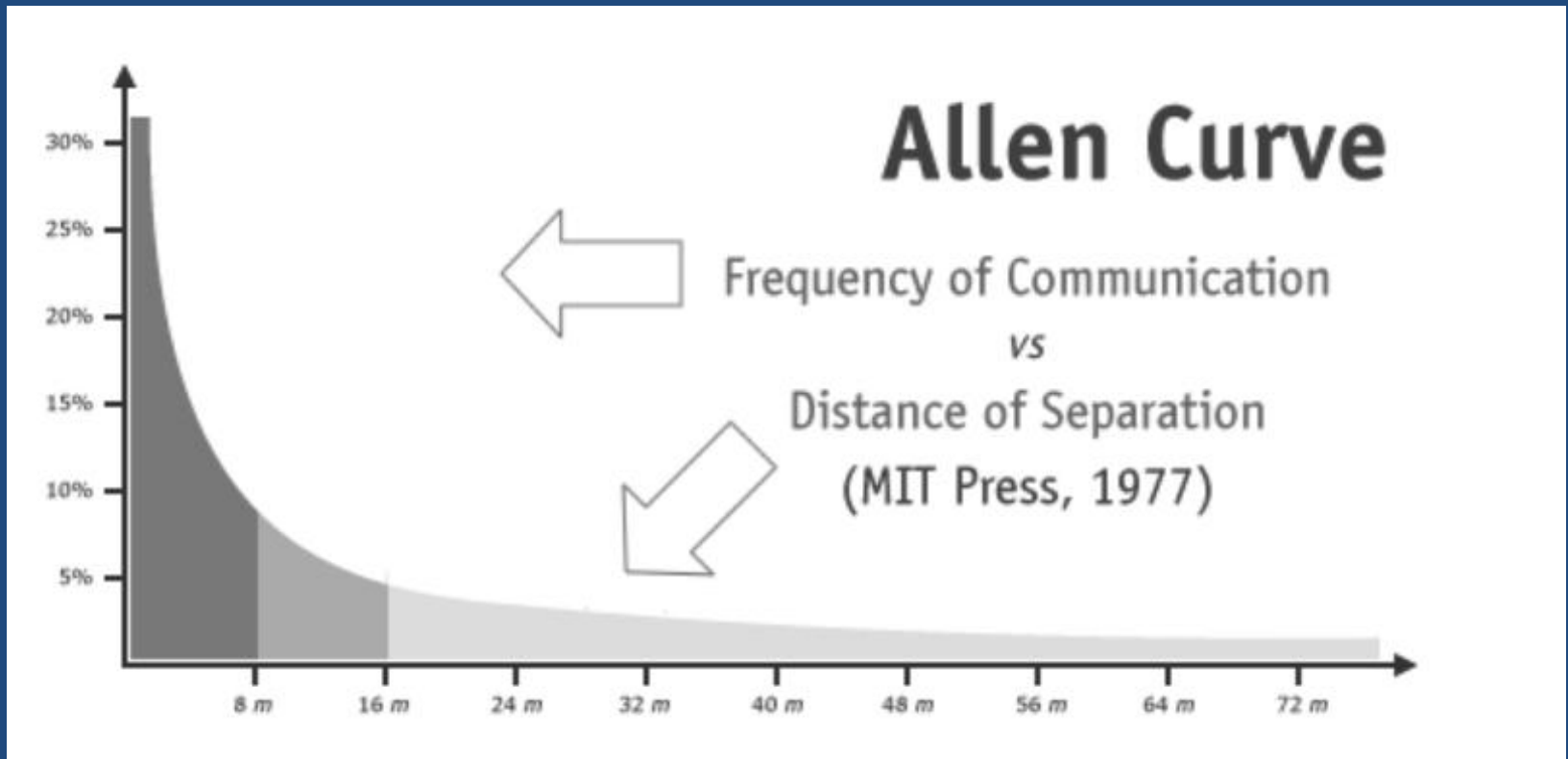
2. Challenge based models

3. Collaboration, place shaping and innovation districts

Collaboration is good but ...



Extent of collaboration

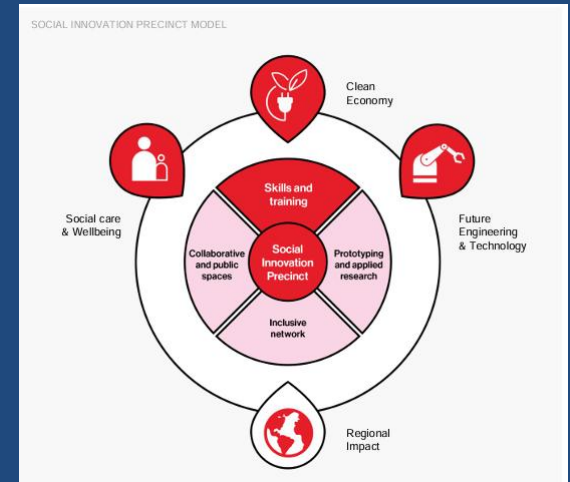
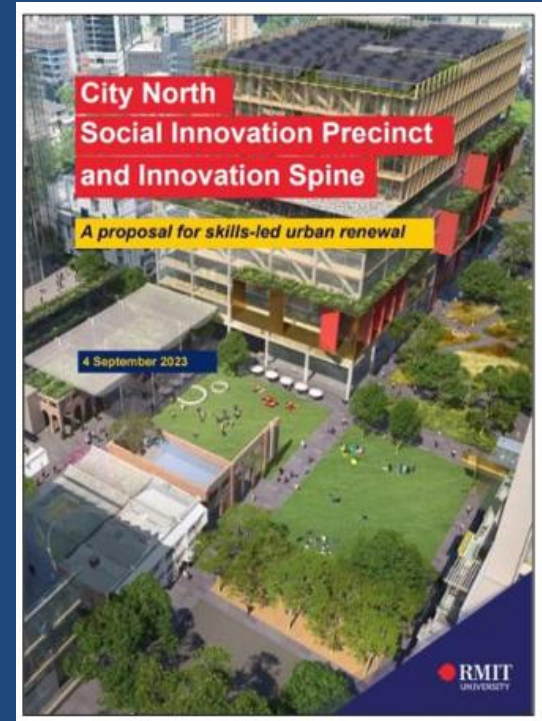


Someone sitting two metres away from you four times more likely to talk to you regularly than someone sitting twenty metres away. People working on different floors were unlikely ever to interact with you and people in separate buildings would probably never be encountered at all.

-

- 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.

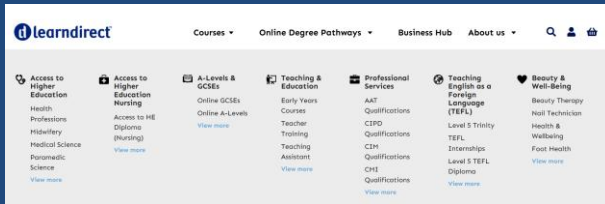




4. Lifelong learning



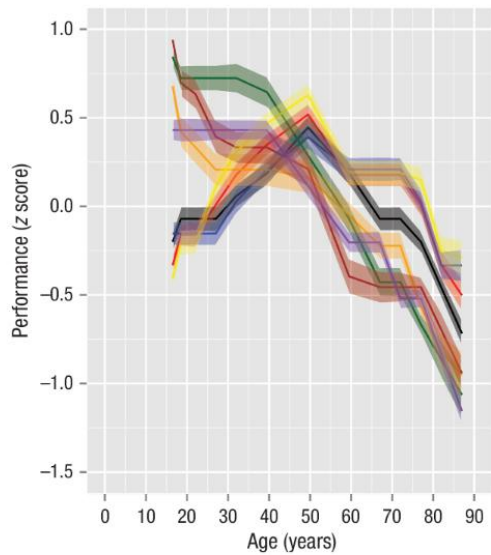
OU: 200,000 students, Learn Direct: 500,000 students at its peak: 4.5m in total, U3A: 400,000 members in 1,000 local groups



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



- Arithmetic
- Comprehension
- Information
- STM: Family Pictures
- STM: Stories
- STM: Word Pairs
- Vocabulary
- WM: Letter-Number Sequencing (WAIS)

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>

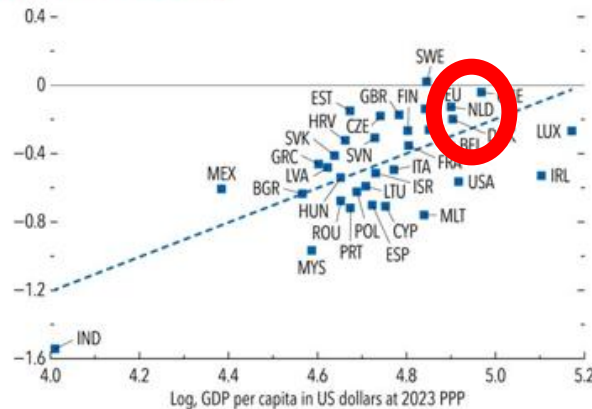
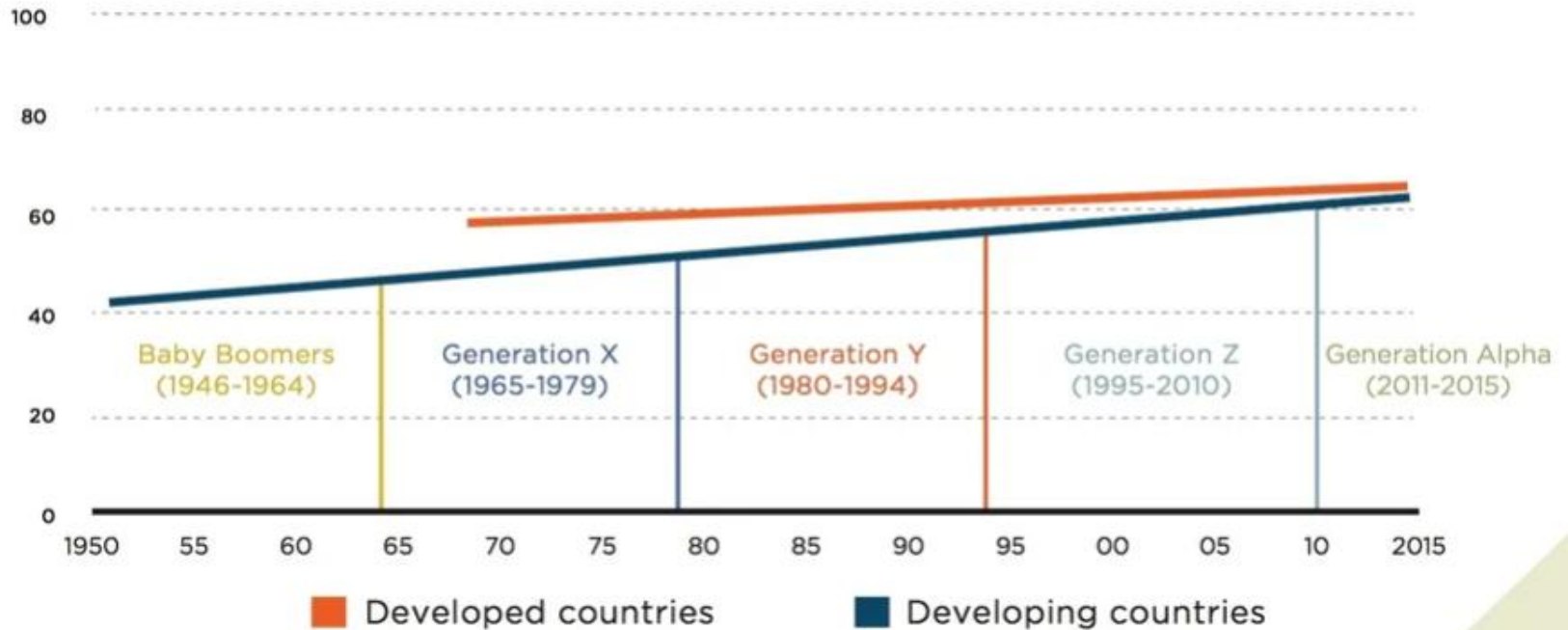


Figure 2.5. Cognitive Capacity (Regression estimates, cognitive health score, country fixed effects)



THE FLYNN EFFECT

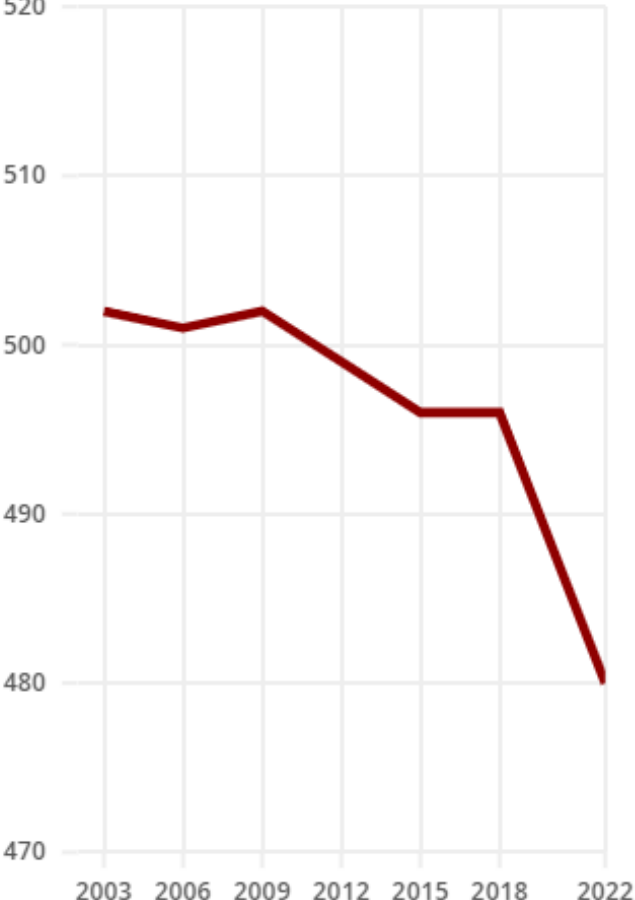
Improved worldwide IQ test performance



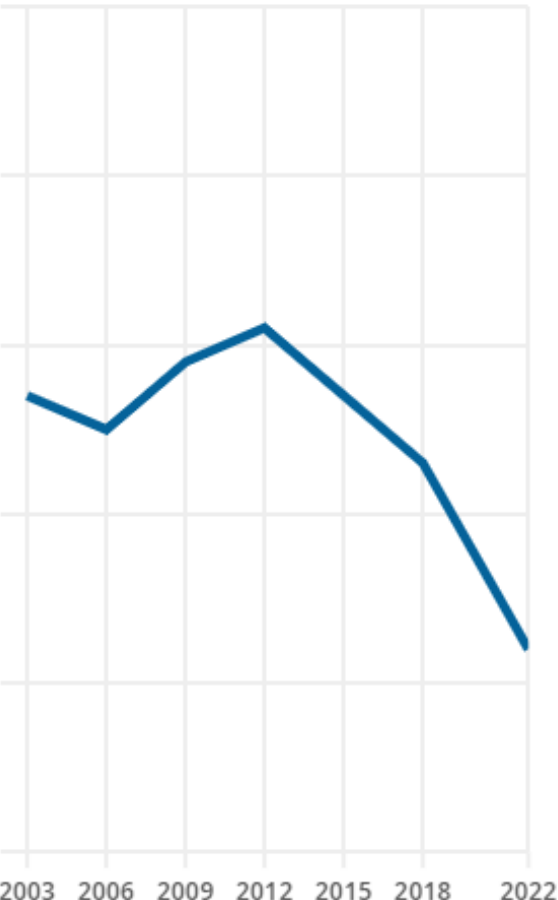
Source: McCrindle Research, 2012. Generations Defined
BBC World Service, 2015. Are humans getting cleverer?

PISA test scores, OECD average

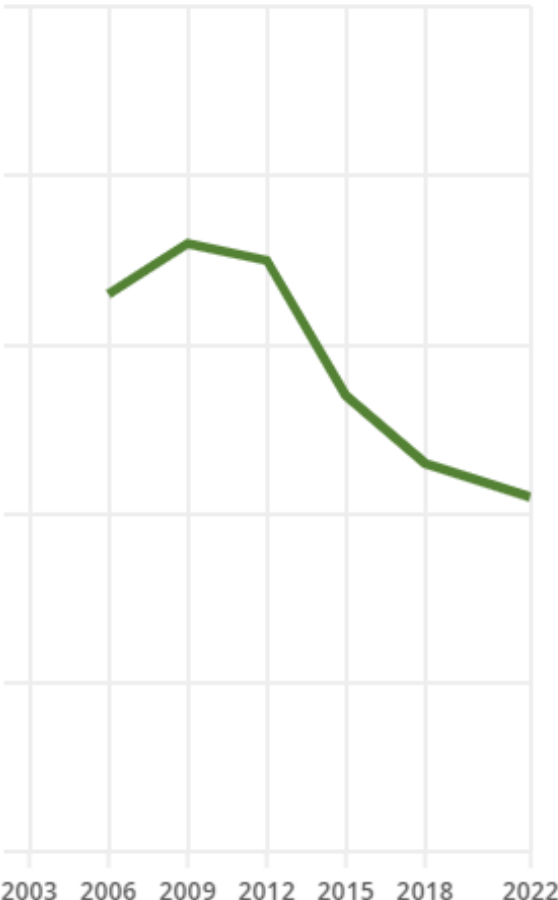
Mathematics



Reading

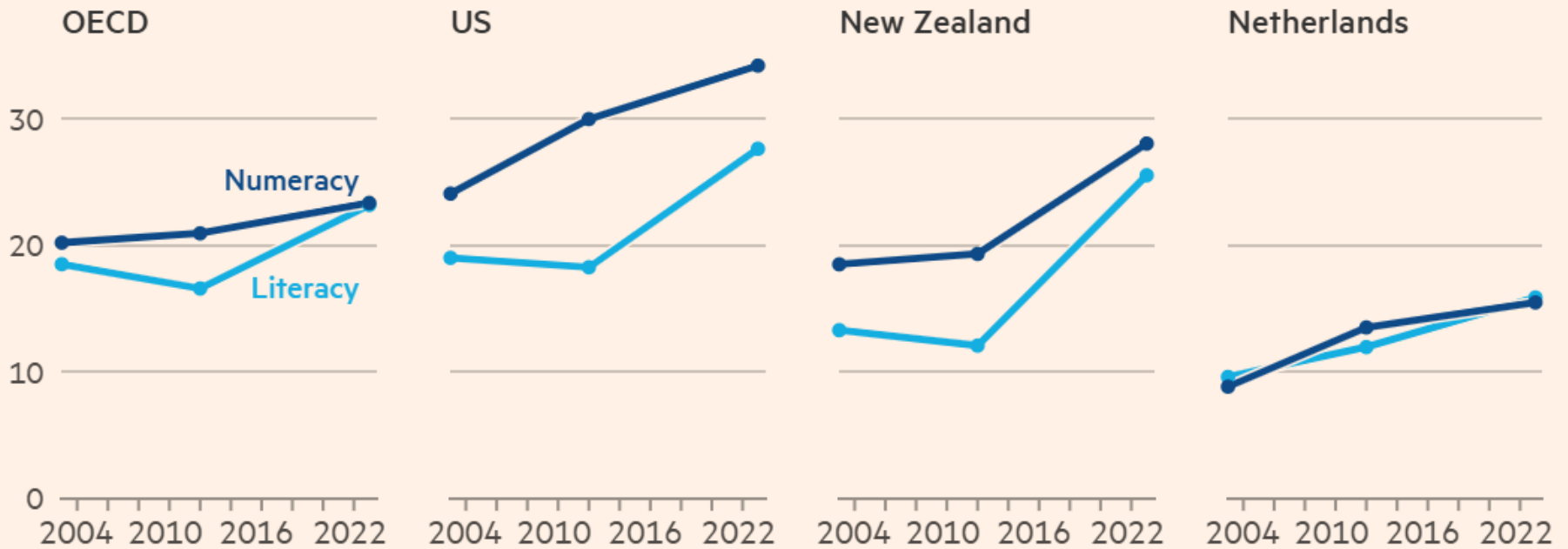


Science



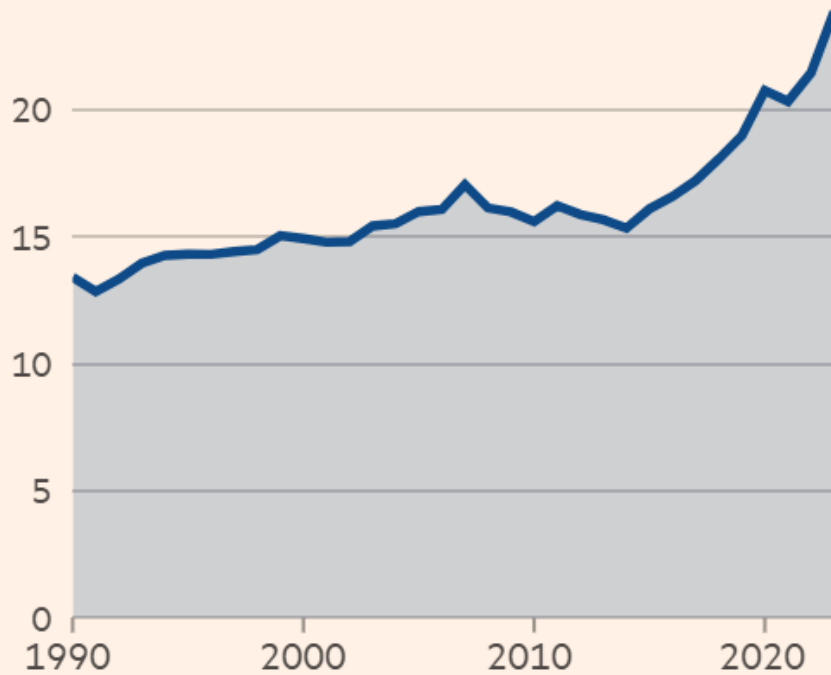
The share of adults who struggle to process information is rising

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

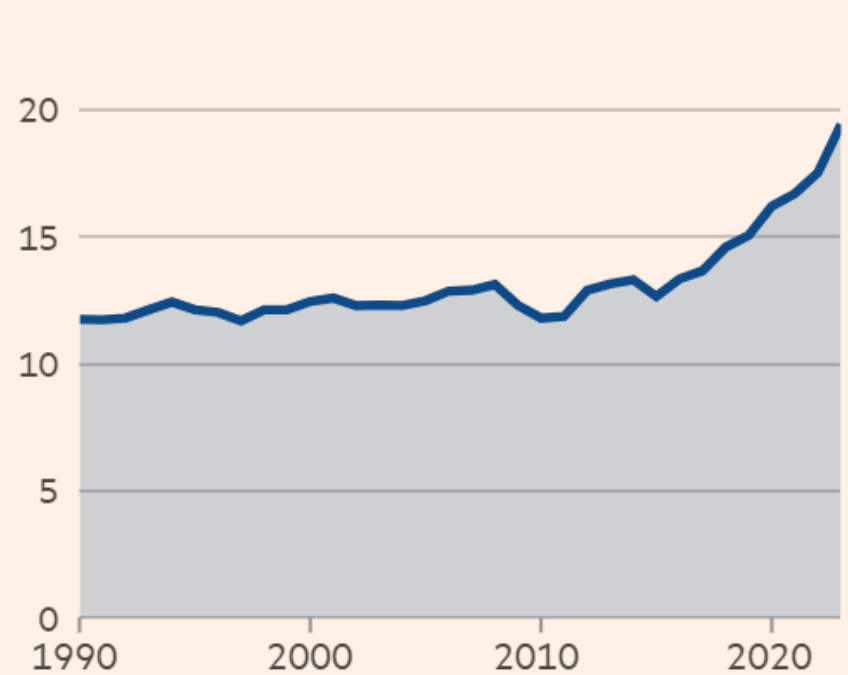


Share of US 18-year-olds who report particular issues on at least 5 of the past 30 days (%)

Difficulty thinking or concentrating



Trouble learning new things



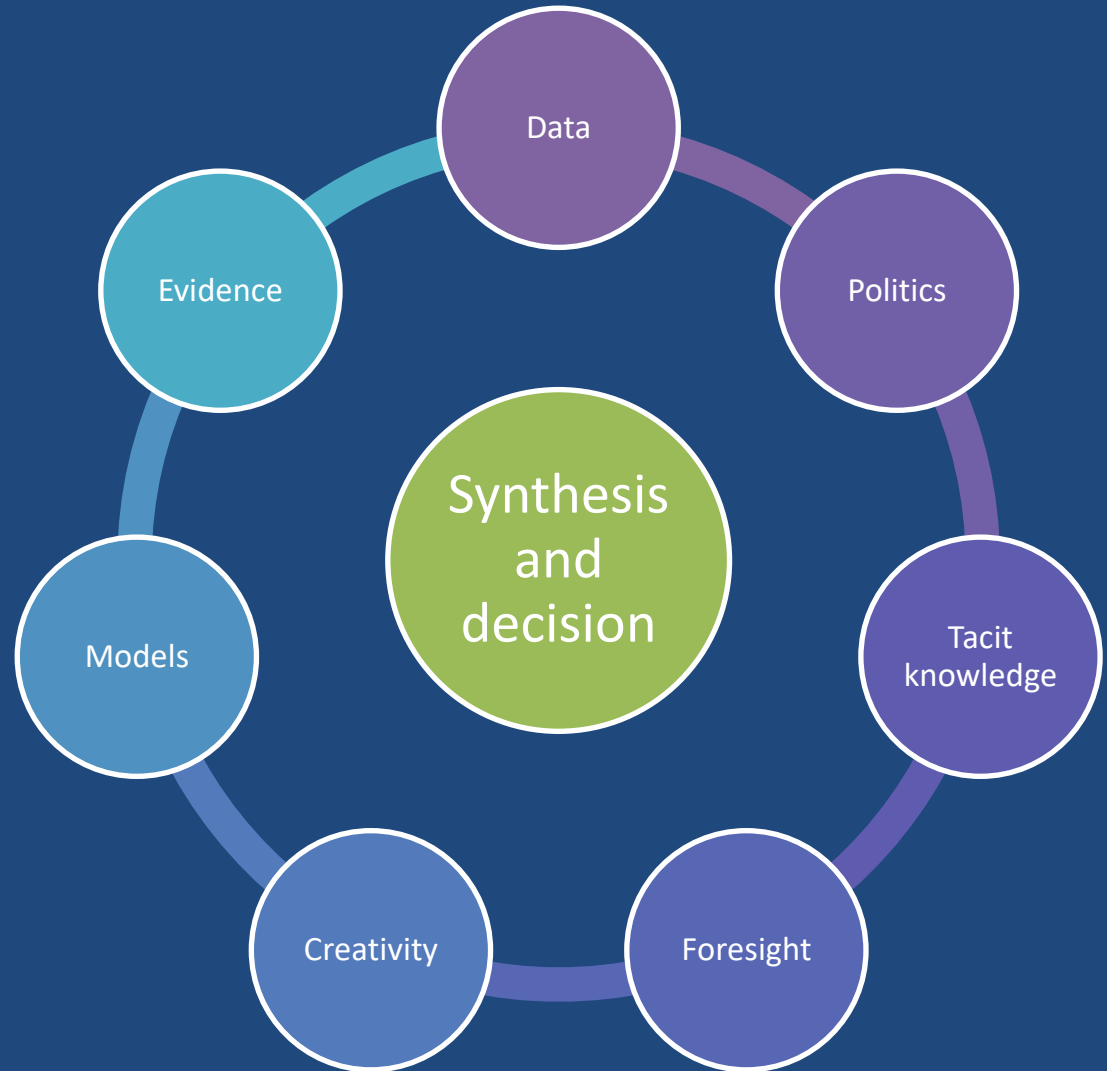
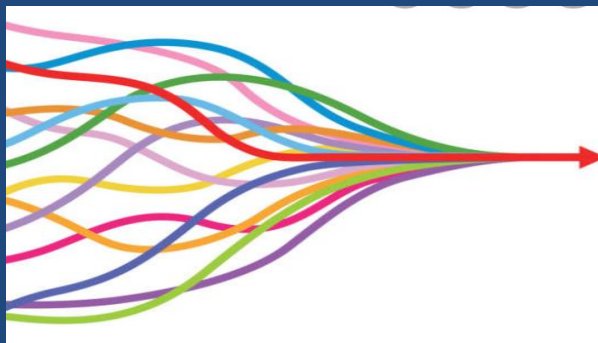
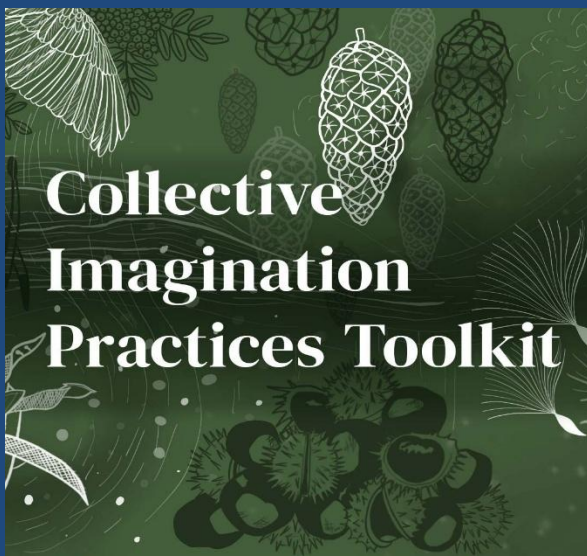
Source: FT analysis of Monitoring the Future survey

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 composition. It features a dark blue base color with numerous glowing orange and yellow particles of varying sizes scattered throughout. These particles are interconnected by thin, light blue lines that create a sense of a network or data flow. The overall effect is a dynamic, futuristic, and somewhat ethereal digital landscape.

No institution has a divine
right to exist...