Universities Enable the 100 Year Life

Preparing universities for the next century

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Executive brief

1. Finding a foothold in the 100-year-life span will put universities on course for the next stage of their growth

2. Rather than issue credentials then send graduates on their way, universities need to furnish enabling experiences which extend throughout people's lives

3. Academic research needs to move into a more socially relevant situation, and broader goals are needed to encourage larger contributions

- Universities need to step-up and **offer education experiences** which enable people across their 100-year life spans. Three-to-four years of tertiary education in the early twenties hardly sustains a graduate over the next 80 years.
- Universities have almost everything they need to curate this next era of contribution. A suite of simple catalysts will help universities make the leap: going beyond cognitive, stimulating independence, exploration and experimentation, accentuating the humanities, fostering 'interdisciplinary depth', and innovating policy.
- Governments need to spark broader national dialogue about **the purpose of academic research**. Such dialogue should question how public investment can spur research which goes well beyond serving academic agendas to address societal challenges, explain something to a community that has remained misunderstood or unexplained, or contribute to a different perspective, or be part of a solution.
- **These frontier innovations are ambitious but not complex.** Universities need to cut loose from hindrances to flourish and carve out purposeful education and research futures. As they grow to the rhythms of 100-year-lives, societies are unlikely to wait for universities to reform. Communicating effectively with external stakeholders is critical for ensuring university contributions are visible and understood by all relevant parties.

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Venturing through the looking glass

- **The 100-year-life offers higher education a stimulating narrative which is obviously far more inspiring than a bibliometric rank.** Advances in medicine, hygiene, and education will continue to extend lifespans and alter the structure and scope of modern lives. With life expectancy increasing in developed countries, the possibility of living a hundred years is shaping up into a distinct reality which opens all kinds of prospects for higher education.

- **Finding a foothold in the 100-year-life will set universities on a firm course for the next stage of their growth.** This is timely, for the 'global game' of recent decades is spurring distortions, yielding diminishing returns, and hindering engagement with the purposeful social agenda which universities have always evolved to serve.

- **To remain relevant** in this new demographic reality universities need to open their doors and experiences to support relearning and reskilling, and more socially purposeful research.

Venturing new contributions

- **It is obvious, but far from institutionally recognized, that three-to-four years of tertiary education in the early twenties hardly sustains over the next 80 years.** There is value for most people in a foundation credential which socializes people into adulthood, ferments professional personae, and blends critical knowledge and skills into a highly plastic brain. But learning fades, even with regular refreshing, and across a 50-year career people may want to pivot, augment or start fresh. The three-stage life model of 'education, employment then retirement' endures, but it is being stretched thin and challenged by individual and social change. Education, like employment, needs to be spread across a lifespan.

- **Academic research, as well, needs to move into a more socially relevant situation.** Research has been servant of university globalization. But it has been stretched too much, and as inquiring fingertips have reached beyond the clouds, researchers' feet have lifted from the ground. A rolling raft of dysfunction has emerged and must be righted to carve a flourishing passage ahead.

Venturing into the next stage

- **Rather than deliver credentials and research then send graduates and publications on their way, universities need to furnish enabling experiences and knowledge contributions which help people and communities grow.**

- Universities, as brain trusts, have always provided expert knowledge. More than ever, they need to focus on being 'enablers in chief' and enabling 'researchers for impact'.

- While institutions, especially powerful ones, are almost lethargic by nature, and to embrace this global agenda universities need to build new purpose and mission and cut loose from unproductive distractions.

New education legitimacy

Engaging with universities must be a journey that extends throughout people's lives, responding to the changing needs of individuals and society. Universities have almost everything they need to curate the next era of education contribution. A suite of simple adjustments and catalysts would help universities make the leap:

- Going beyond the cognitive
- Stimulating independence, exploration and experimentation
- Accentuating the humanities
- Fostering 'interdisciplinary depth'
- Innovating education policy and strategy.
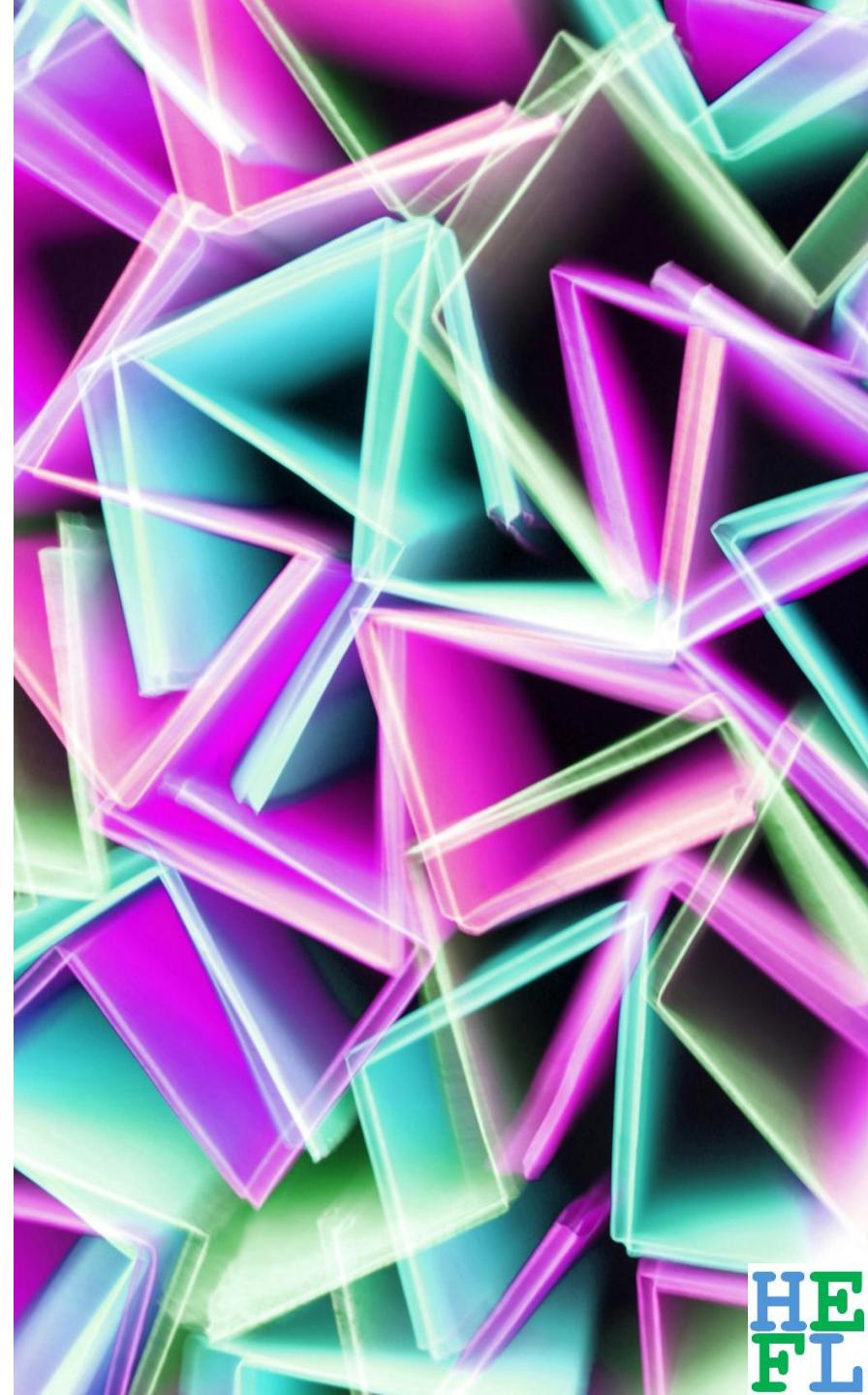
# New education: Beyond cognitive

- **Universities need to go beyond the cognitive.**

- Since their medieval origins, universities have sought to educate the whole person with all kinds of moral, attitudinal, social and professional formation. Elite programs still do, often distinguishing themselves in this way.

- In the process of scaling to offer mass-market degrees, many have stepped around any attempt at 'cultivation' and shrunk to servicing the development of knowledge and necessary skills.

- Reinvigorating social and personal dimensions of university education would help universities get back in touch with people, and the extent to which universities do so will surely firm-up as a competitive frontier.

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New education: Stimulating independence

- **Stimulating independence, exploration and experimentation helps individuals challenge their values, reflect on their identities, and develop a stronger sense of self.**

- Universities can progress this through self-reflexivity which turns activity into learning, then into valuable experiences.

- They can provide opportunities for independent production which encourage taking risks, prototyping new ideas, and pursuing self-driven projects.

- They can provide structure for self-direction, and help when students seek to change courses of study.

- Through such venturing, students can chart pathways, design their lives, and create new states of awareness and identity.
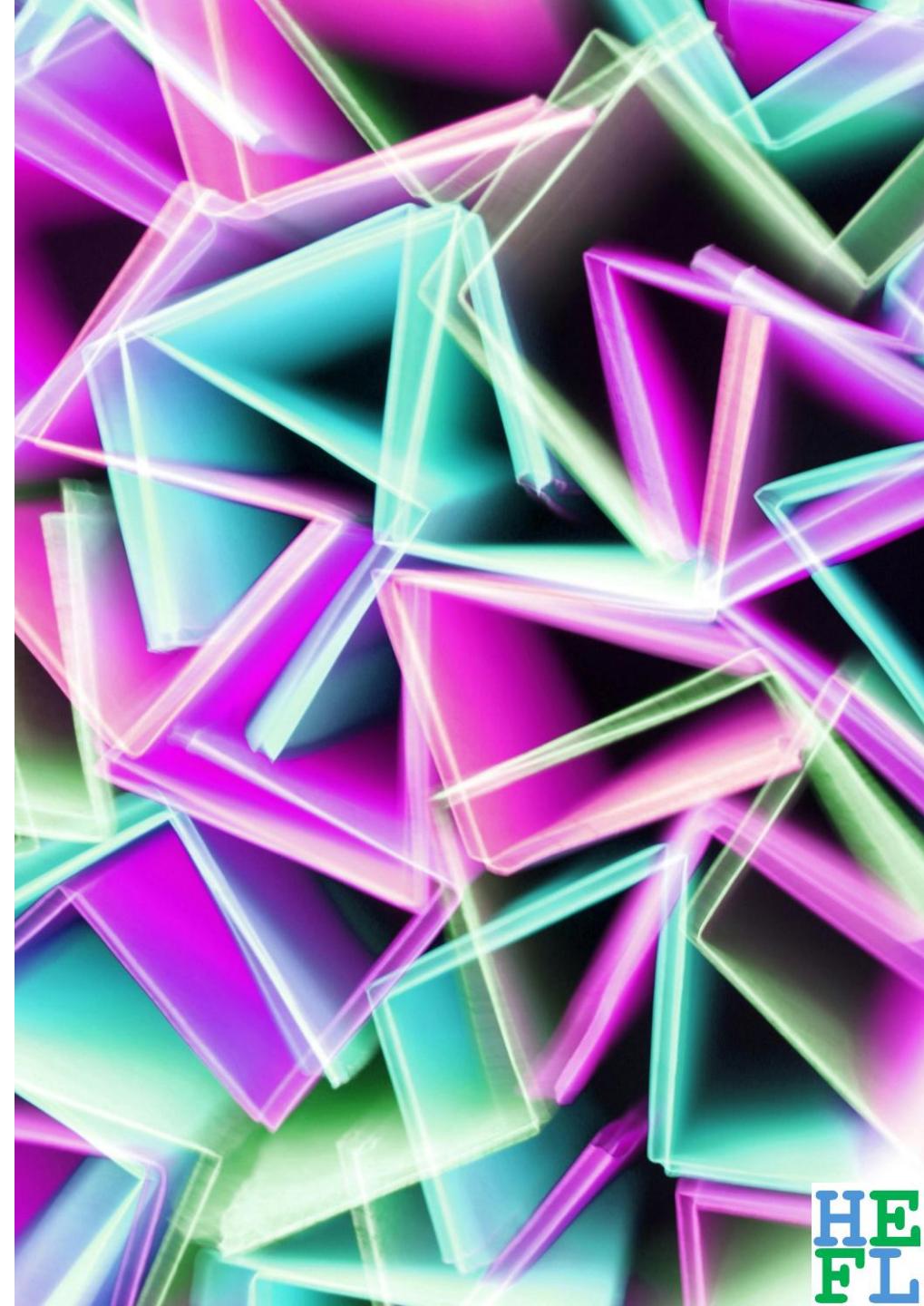
New education: Accentuate humanities

- **Accentuating the humanities will help universities cultivate human qualities.**

- The humanities have suffered several declines in recent decades, precipitated by investments in science and technologies, contested claims for social relevance, and fundamental shakiness fueled by post-structural cosmopolitanism.

- Yet the recent rise of contemporary artificial intelligence reveals that a human-centered education offers essential skills that machines cannot replicate.

- To serve future needs, universities must offer courses that give insights into the human condition through the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

- In studying the humanities, we learn about humanity, or what it means to be human.

- The jobs that will withstand the fourth industrial revolution are those that require an understanding of human nature and a reliance on human empathy.

New education: Interdisciplinary depth

- **Fostering 'interdisciplinary depth' is important as universities look to enable learning across a lifetime and frame success as human development rather than the count of credentials.**

- 'Interdisciplinary depth' works beyond all sorts of protective walls built around disciplines, and adds substance and mitigates against any potential disciplinary snobbery.

- Rather than skirt across diverse fields to round out core functional learning, learners should be encouraged to make deep and dynamic interconnections.

- This obviously requires changes to curriculum architectures, perhaps even to liberal arts.

- New teaching skills are needed, and the reification of new fields, in particular AI ethics, neuroeconomics, and sustainability studies.

New education: Innovating policy and strategies

- **Governments will need to innovate education policy and enable universities to move beyond strategies which currently make it hard for universities to take the leap.**

- A national mindset change is needed to switch universities into lifelong enablers.

- In most countries, funding, qualification and regulatory structures are set for the three-stage life model (study → work → retire) and need reform.

- For their part, universities can pivot to multi-stage learning through professional and continuing education programs, modular courses, certifications, and development programs, and leveraging AI and data analytics to personalize tailored learning experiences.

- Forging age-integrative strategies, integrating leisure and learning, and embracing work-integrated learning offer near-term opportunities for integration.
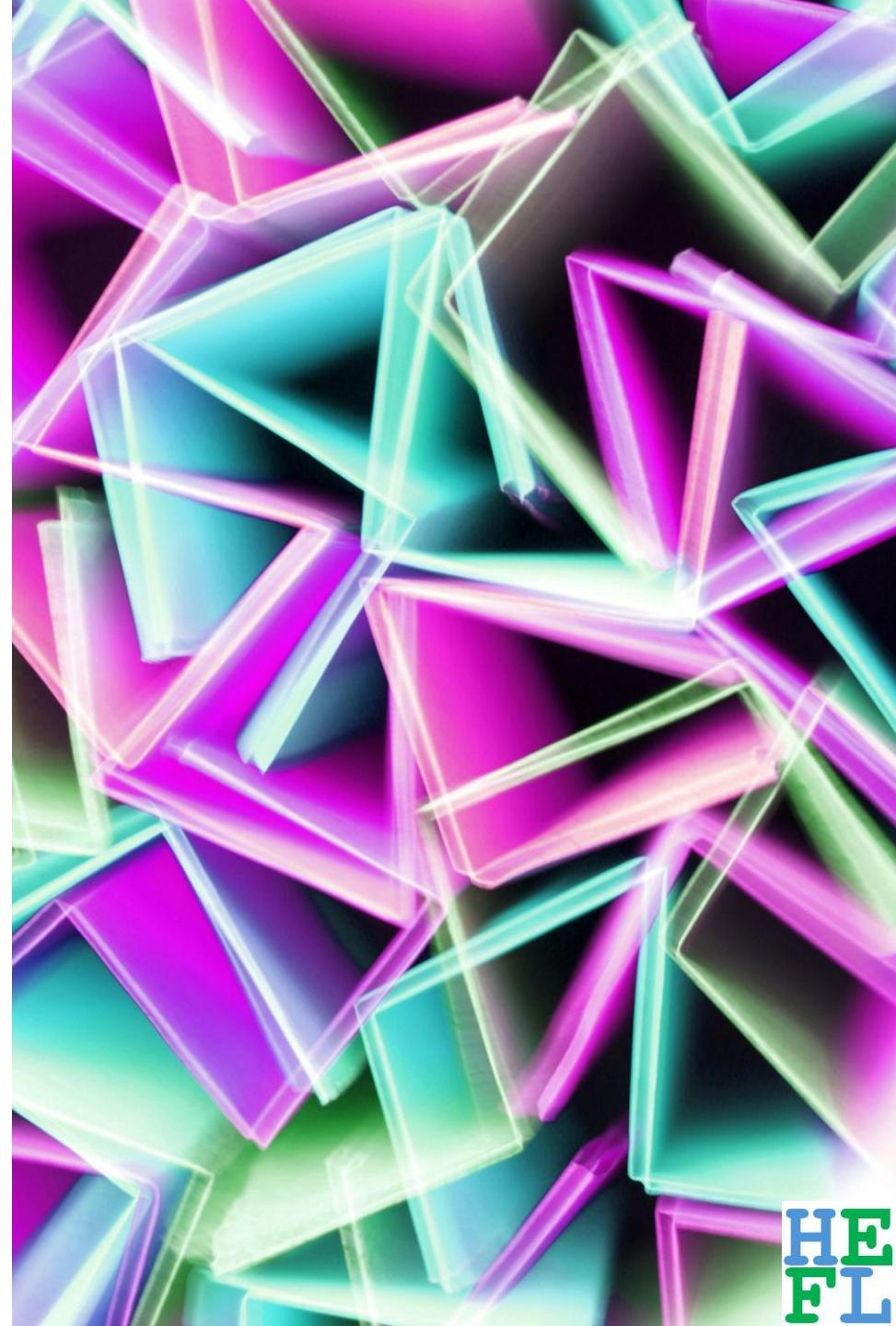
Research with purpose

- **For centuries university research has swayed between conducting research as an intellectual exercise and to solve societal challenges.** Recent decades have positioned research as an instrument for winning reputational competitions. This focus on short-term reputation has underpinned a longer-term crisis of direction, requiring re-engagement with society to overcome. Affirming the purpose of research beyond short-term performance metrics is needed urgently to fuel engagement and contribution.

- **As the main funders of academic research, governments need to spark broader national dialogue about the purpose of research.** Such dialogue should question how public investment can spur research which goes well beyond serving academic agendas to address societal challenges, explain something to a community that has remained misunderstood or unexplained, or contribute to a different perspective, or be part of a solution hollows-out alternative futures which can be made.

Research with purpose

- **Academic researchers are competitive by nature, and setting broader goals will encourage larger contributions.** Universities should grow to think of research impact in academic and societal terms. Partly, this means countering the 'metricization' of research performance, which is a recent phenomenon. Partly, this means finding ways to show that universities are delivering benefits to society. This involves identifying stakeholders and understanding their needs, working with stakeholders to frame the research from the start, and engaging stakeholders in translating research findings into actionable outcomes. Assessing impact beyond academic metrics would do much to enhance consequential research.

- **Becoming anxiously and even existentially besotted with certain forms of publication has widened the chasm between academics and the public.** Researchers write for researchers, even when the public is the paid-up end recipient. Many publications wallow behind commercial paywalls, even when the public has funded its production. Clearly, alternative channels make research more accessible and actionable. This means going beyond traditional academic formats to reach different audiences, using podcasts, videos, exhibitions, films, popular books, publications targeted at professional bodies, trade associations and communities of practice, and parliamentary reports, policy papers, consultancy reports, pedagogical guides and toolkits. Such publication is itself easy yet needs codification in reformed research evaluation systems.

- **Clearly, imbuing university research with greater purpose needs to reify space which keeps universities as the brains trusts of society.** Freedom and autonomy are essential for groundbreaking inquiry, as is public accountability. Rather than add 'engagement' as an additional administrative burden, dysfunctional measures can be retired. This happens, often without fanfare. Until recently, universities promoted the count of books in their libraries as a show of research muscle, then libraries became learning commons, books and publications transformed, and sustainability encouraged interest in sharing.

Cutting distractions loose

- **Universities need to cut loose from hinderances to flourish and carve out purposeful education and research, futures.**
Universities which have grown quickly into 'world class era' institutions since the late 1990s have carved out enviable reputations and growth but also a cluster of academic and institutional challenges.
- **The quest for 'global' status has spurred diminishing returns.**
Logically, not every university can be the best in the world, yet the quest for world-class brilliance has led most to invest in trying. Striving for a world-class reputation made sense for a few decades, but the quest to sparkle gets exhausting after even a few rounds, reverts to management optimization at the expense of meaningful innovation, and hollows-out alternative futures which can be made.

Cutting distractions loose

- **Over-amping research metrics has sparked a symphony of rat-running and overtly bad behavior.** Researchers, journals, and whole fields have been infected by problems like data fabrication, data dredging, coercive citation and citation cartels, magniloquence, mistreatment and misalignment. Platforms, corporations, metrics and funding arrangements have propagated misalignment and divergence not only between excellence and integrity, but also between universities and society.
- **These dysfunctions directly undermine a university's ability to support the 100-year life.**
  - Education has stagnated in many advanced economies, with so much zeal attached to research.
  - University enrolment is low, uneven and declining.
  - Curricula have become brittle, especially from being coded into online platforms, leading to the teaching of dated skills.
  - In a quest for market differentiation programs have veered towards hyper-specialization.
  - Teaching remains unaccredited practice, rather than being professionalized and structured.
  - Much assessment of learning outcomes has hardly changed in decades and is being exploited by commercial cheaters.
  - Graduate outcomes are misaligned, leading to unemployment, underemployment, 'lying flat', and quiet quitting.
  - Progress is evidently feasible, as institutions and other education sectors have shown, and progress must be made to embrace emerging opportunities.

Innovating for impact

- **These frontier innovations for higher education are not complex, but they are ambitious.** Most professionals leading and working in and around universities are mindful of these challenges and opportunities. Imagination is never in short supply in higher education. Yet very few education systems or institutions have the foresight and power to advance such ideas to fruition.

- **As they grow to the rhythms of 100-year-lives, societies are unlikely to wait for universities to reform.** Universities need to organize for impact. This would not be their first time. The sector is littered with a history of pivoting between the fluctuating and competing interests of church, state, professions, and science. Creating cultivated gentlemen, training clergy or government officials, and servicing economic growth are no longer all or only the primary reason to be. Neither, soon, may be striving to clamber up corporatized bibliometric lists.

- Now it is time for universities once again to step outside the looking glass, and chart new purposeful and thriving futures.

Innovating for impact

- **Communicating effectively with external stakeholders is critical for ensuring that university contributions are visible and understood by all relevant parties.**

- Universities realize their public value by navigating between 'corporate' approaches of strategy, alignment and targeted investment, and the more independent, laissez faire style that characterizes academia.

- As people's lifespans lengthen, will universities themselves endure and remain relevant for the next 100 years?

- Surely, yes, by taking bold and transformative steps, and embracing the emerging milieu.
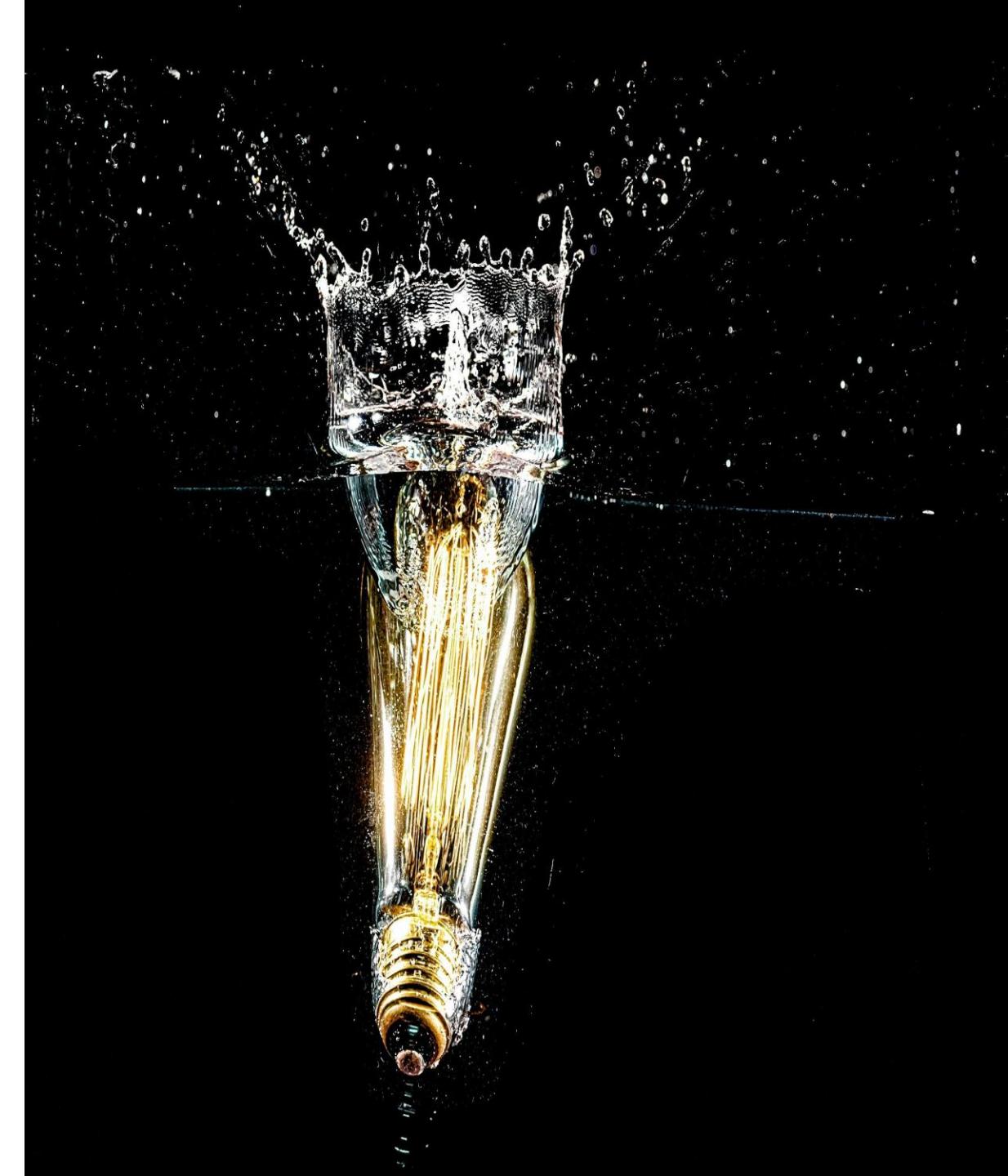
Further reading for inquiring minds

This briefing is adapted by Hamish Coates from three 2024 lectures delivered by Lily Kong as part of the 15th Singapore Institute for Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture Series titled 'Universities Reinvented: Shaping Legacy and Impact for a New World':

- Lecture 1 : **Through the Looking Glass: Insights into the Origin and Evolution of Universities**
- Lecture 2 : **At the Crossroads: Universities for the 100-Year Life**
- Lecture 3 : **Beyond the Ivory Tower: Research and the Dilemmas of Quality and Relevance**

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Next steps

1. What three actions can you take from this briefing?

2. What work is already underway?

3. Connect to engage:
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