

Reimagining Creativity in Higher Education: Human Imagination, Creative Practice, and Responsible Innovation in the Age of AI

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Research Overview (50 words)

This presentation examines creativity's place in higher education amid rapid AI intensification and digital transformation. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from arts education, creative practice, and digital innovation, alongside ongoing analysis from Trinity College Dublin's *Creative Futures Forum*, it explores how higher education can sustain human-centred creative practice in technologically mediated futures.

Purpose

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into educational, cultural, and professional life has intensified long-standing questions concerning creativity, authorship, cognition, and human agency. Within higher education (HE), these developments are generating both opportunity and anxiety: opportunity through enhanced access to tools for ideation, experimentation, and interdisciplinary collaboration; anxiety through concerns regarding cognitive outsourcing, diminished critical engagement, erosion of imaginative capacity, and the potential displacement of creative labour.

These questions carry particular urgency within Europe's creative and cultural sectors, which generate over 4% of EU GDP and employ more than 8 million people, representing one of the continent's most significant concentrations of innovation talent. As creative industries adapt to AI-enabled transformation, higher education institutions face increasing pressure to prepare graduates capable not merely of technical fluency, but of exercising discernment, ethical judgment, originality, and imaginative responsiveness within rapidly changing professional landscapes.

This presentation investigates where creativity sits within this historical moment of accelerated digital dependency. It asks: What forms of creative practice remain distinctly human? How should higher education respond to the opportunities and risks associated with AI? What pedagogical approaches best cultivate imagination, criticality, and creative resilience in technologically saturated learning environments?

Positioning creativity not as an optional enhancement but as a foundational human capacity, the presentation argues that the future of HE depends upon renewed commitment to imaginative pedagogies that place human development at the centre of technological innovation. We propose that creative practice has historically evolved through engagement with new tools, materials, and ways of knowing, and that AI represents the latest—though uniquely consequential—moment in this trajectory.

Methods

Situated at the intersection of arts education, creative practice, and digital innovation research, this work adopts a critical interpretive review methodology combining two interrelated evidence sources. First, it draws upon an international review of contemporary literature spanning higher education pedagogy, creativity studies, digital transformation, AI ethics, cognitive science, and creative industries research. The review maps current debates regarding AI's impact on creative practice, including concerns around over-reliance, deskilling, authorship, and cognitive offloading, alongside emerging scholarship on augmentation, co-creativity, and human-machine collaboration.

Second, the presentation incorporates ongoing thematic analysis of discussions, keynote contributions, and interdisciplinary exchanges emerging from the *Creative Futures Forum*, convened at Trinity College Dublin in May. The Forum brought together leaders from academia, policy, technology, and the creative industries to examine how AI, immersive technologies, and digital transformation are reshaping creative work, skills development, authorship, and creative livelihoods.

This dual-source approach enables the presentation to synthesise theoretical insight with live sectoral perspectives, offering attendees an up-to-date account of how higher education and the creative industries are responding globally to digital acceleration.

Results / Discussion

Emerging analysis indicates that current debates often frame AI through binary narratives of either technological inevitability or cultural threat. This presentation challenges such polarisation, suggesting instead that the central educational question is not whether AI should be adopted, but how its integration can be shaped by pedagogical values that preserve and extend human creative capacity. Preliminary thematic findings suggest three significant tensions.

First, there is growing concern regarding cognitive displacement: the possibility that habitual outsourcing of ideation, synthesis, and problem-solving may weaken capacities central to higher learning, including critical reflection, imaginative speculation, and sustained intellectual struggle.

Second, there is evidence of increasing demand for creativity as human distinction. As generative systems automate routine production, originality, interpretive judgment, embodied practice, ethical reasoning, and imaginative risk-taking become more—not less—valuable educational outcomes.

Third, analysis highlights the need for redefined pedagogical models that move beyond instrumental digital literacy toward imaginative fluency. This requires teaching and assessment practices that engage students as active makers, critical interpreters, and ethical co-designers of technological futures.

The presentation situates these findings within longer historical traditions of creative adaptation. Creative practitioners have always engaged with emerging technologies—from print and photography to film, digital media, and immersive systems—not through passive acceptance, but through experimentation, critique, and transformation. AI should be understood within this lineage.

We further argue that imagination is not peripheral to innovation; it is the precondition that made digital and AI systems possible. If higher education is to prepare students for increasingly complex social, technological, and ecological futures, imagination must be cultivated as a core educational competency across disciplines.

The presentation concludes by proposing that responsible innovation in HE requires integrating creative practice, reflective inquiry, and technological experimentation in ways that affirm human agency. In responding to contemporary polycrises, higher education must resist reductive efficiency narratives and instead foster graduates capable of imaginative, ethical, and creative action.

Attendees will gain evidence-informed insights into international practices and emerging responses, alongside practical provocations for embedding creativity and human-centred innovation more deeply within teaching, learning, and assessment.