

Uberfication from Cradle to Grave

Thought Experiment 4: World 4

DRIVERS: Ageing population
Sharing economy
Consumer power
Unbundling

IN THIS WORLD...

The role of the university as trusted gatekeeper and source of accreditation has shifted as new forms of value and economy re-shape higher education. Learning is highly commodified, as each individual purchases micro-credit from multiple providers, accumulating credit through life while building a personal portfolio evidencing all their key competencies. Traditional named qualifications are seen as an archaism only maintained by a very small group of ancient universities.

The boundaries between education, employment and retirement become blurred as the population ages, and higher education now takes place across the course of a lifetime, with ‘upskilling’ at point of need becoming a key part of much provision.

Academics work for the most part as freelancers, building personal and team reputations which compete in the global free education market. There is a widening divide between superstar academic-entrepreneurs with global brands, and academic piece-workers who make a living through precarious contracts in the educational gig economy.

As the university ‘unbundles’ and people increasingly study from home and work, the place of the campus diminishes. Some universities redesign themselves as platforms which aggregate multiple outsourced services for learner support, content development and teaching, and many campus estates are largely rented out to suppliers as hybrid distance learning becomes the norm.

THIS FUTURE, THIS UNIVERSITY

Commodified	Always-on
Outsourced	Upskilling
Platform-based	Freelance
Individuated	Disaggregated

OUR VALUES IN THIS WORLD...

VALUE 1, EXPERIENCE OVER ASSESSMENT

• The main function of universities is to measure and offer credit for learning; the quality of learner experience is the responsibility of learners themselves, and depends on the quality of academic support they are able to buy.

VALUE 2, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

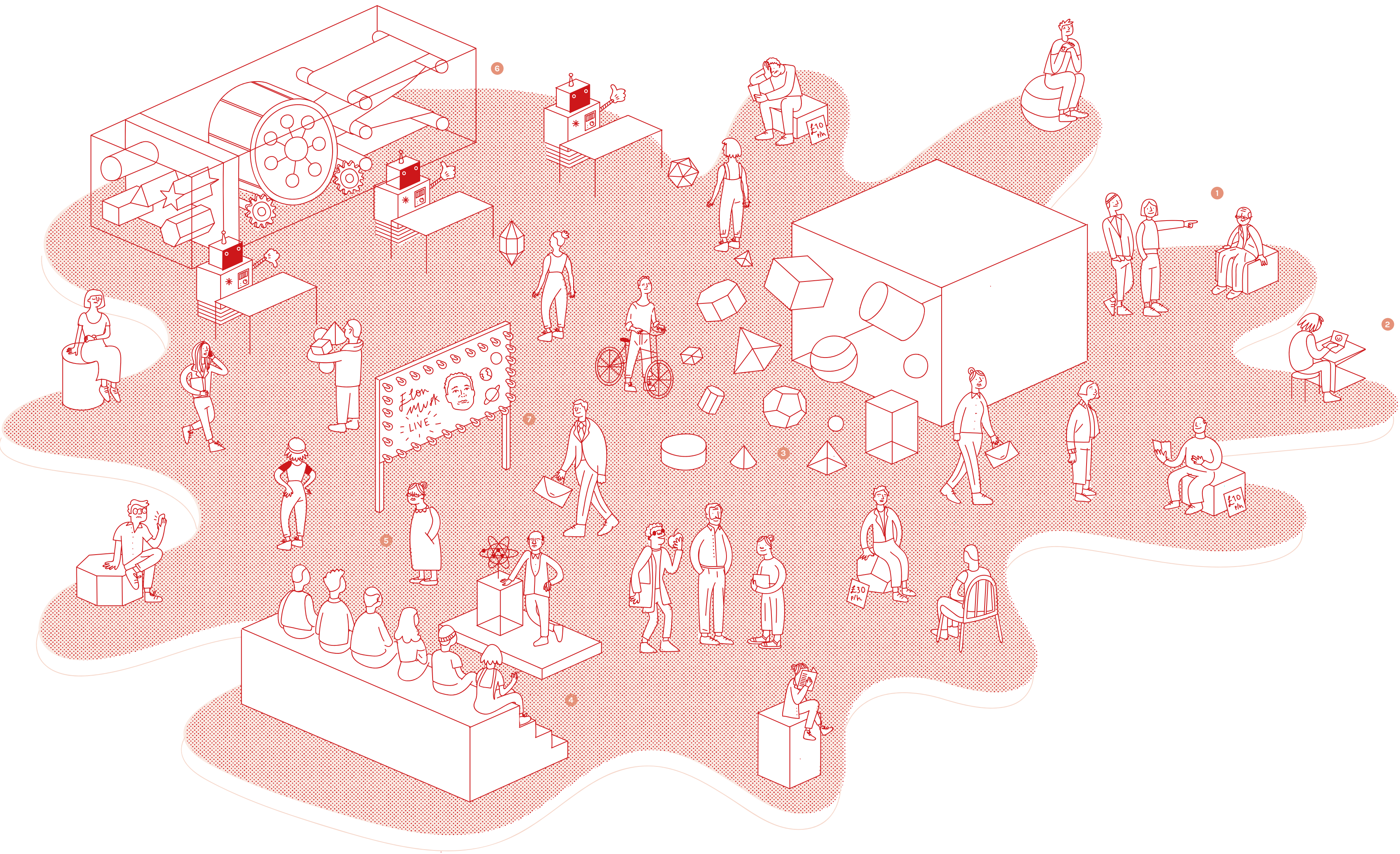
• Learners become increasingly empowered and self-directed, while academic precarity is the norm.
• Diversity and inclusion is no longer the responsibility of institutions, but is determined by learners’ chosen pathways and their purchasing choices.
• Competition between academic teachers widens the divide between the established elite and the newcomers trying to build profile.

VALUE 3, RELATIONSHIPS OVER INSTRUCTION

• Basic instruction is available to all students, with ready access to core knowledge universal and provided online.
• Meaningful academic exchange needs to be bought, and depends on how much expert academic time learners can afford to buy.

VALUE 4, PARTICIPATION AND TRANSPARENCY

• The purchase-power of learners is the main defining feature of higher education: archaic power relations in which students had to be allowed the power to participate by teachers have entirely disappeared.
• All academic achievement is recorded immutably online and open to public gaze; likewise teacher profiles and capabilities are evaluated and ranked by each learner-consumer online, and reputation management is a core academic skill.



THIS FUTURE EXPANDED...

1. TEACHING IN THE GIG ECONOMY

• Academics operate on a freelance basis and work across universities
• Student-consumers hold the power in the learning relationship, and choose to contract in lecturers to help them work through blocks of content. They select teachers based on cost, reputation, and expertise.
• Higher education is driven by student demand rather than university supply.

2. INDIVIDUAL FLEXIBILITY OVER COMMUNITY

• As the University structures its offering to enable individual flexibility for students and academics, co-present communities of scholarship become rare.
• With the return of the itinerant academic, global access and individual mobility become the defining feature of higher education.

3. UNBUNDLING

• The university is disaggregated into its component parts, with education split into small blocks. In some cases, these blocks are made up of learning content, and in others they are assessment-only courses used to evidence and accredit knowledge. Learners can choose how they assemble these blocks.
• Many universities market themselves on the basis of the quality of their proprietary algorithms which help students assemble viable learning pathways.

4. ACADEMICS ON DEMAND

• The cost of education blocks varies widely, as does the time of the academics who support them.
• The pay of academics is generally determined by individuals on the basis of demand and reputation, though there are some federated agreements for key price points between universities. This system has allowed some superstar academics to rise to the top while others who have not built reputation or numbers of followers struggle to make a living.

5. AGE NO OBJECT

• Lifelong education brings new kinds of diversity to the university. Higher education is no longer perceived as being for the young, and all ages and life-stages are educated together.

6. TRANSPARENT PATHWAYS

• The algorithms that are used to mediate and verify learning pathways are open, transparent and editable. This helps teachers and learners understand how curricula are formed and how they can best be supported.

7. PRESTIGE THROUGH TEACHING

• The university is no longer measured by its academic research: this is all now industry-funded and led, or conducted by networks of individual academics funded by wealthy charities and trusts.
• Universities no longer generate new knowledge, but build their reputations based on teaching.