

Review

The Power–Wisdom Gap: Reframing Higher Education for Human Flourishing in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Higher education is increasingly asked to prepare learners for societies shaped by artificial intelligence, ecological destabilization, labour-market reconfiguration, and declining institutional trust. Yet many universities remain governed by a scarcity model: knowledge transmission, durable credentials, and economic productivity. This article argues that the model is structurally misaligned with emerging conditions because the central educational challenge is shifting from knowledge scarcity to power abundance. The deeper crisis is not a deficit of knowledge production but a deficit of formation: higher education has underdeveloped the human capacities required to use technologically amplified power wisely, meaningfully and responsibly. The article develops this argument through a conceptual design with an embedded systematized scoping review and thematic synthesis across higher education studies, AI governance, futures and foresight, sustainability transitions, human flourishing, wisdom science, and research metrics. It proposes flourishing stewardship as a new first principle for higher education: the cultivation of persons and institutions capable of pursuing meaningful lives while preserving and advancing the conditions for shared human and planetary flourishing. The article contributes the Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model, linking external transition conditions, scarcity-model misalignment, the power–wisdom gap, six formation capacities, and five institutional transformation levers. The model is operationalized through design questions, researchable indicators, and propositions for future empirical testing. The paper contributes to technological forecasting and social change by positioning higher education as a socio-technical transition infrastructure whose purpose is not merely to adapt learners to technological change, but to form the human agency needed to govern it.

Keywords: higher education futures; artificial intelligence; flourishing; stewardship; technological forecasting; socio-technical transitions; university governance



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1. Introduction

Higher education was historically built for conditions under which authoritative knowledge was comparatively scarce, expert authority was institutionally concentrated, and the consequences of technical decision-making were more bounded than they are now. Under such conditions, universities could plausibly define themselves through knowledge preservation, knowledge transmission, certification, and preparation for professional life. These functions remain valuable. However, they no longer provide a sufficient account of

purpose for institutions operating amid artificial intelligence, climate risk, labour-market volatility, democratic fragility, and social fragmentation [1–5].

The transition is not simply technological. It is socio-technical and civilizational. Generative AI has made advanced cognitive assistance widely available, affecting study, writing, coding, professional communication, research, and organizational decision-making [6–10]. At the same time, climate science and Earth system research describe narrowing safe and just operating spaces for humanity, with educational systems implicated in the forms of knowledge, agency, and responsibility required for transition [11–14]. Labour-market analyses further suggest that generative AI is more likely to transform tasks across occupations than simply eliminate all work, intensifying the need for human judgement, adaptation, and social dialogue [15–18].

Recent debates on generative AI in higher education also show that the issue is no longer limited to adoption or prohibition. Empirical, policy, and practitioner discussions increasingly concern student and staff readiness, assessment redesign, AI literacy, unequal access, data governance, academic integrity, and the effects of AI tools on motivation, mental health, authorship, and learning relationships. This emerging landscape strengthens the article's central claim: the educational question is not simply whether AI should be used, but what forms of judgement, responsibility, and institutional design are needed for its use to remain formative rather than merely efficient [6,8–10,19,20].

In this context, the central question for higher education is no longer only what students should know. It is what kinds of persons, professionals, citizens, researchers, and decision-makers higher education should help form when cognitive capability is technologically amplified and the consequences of error can cascade across social and ecological systems. The question is also institutional: what should universities themselves become if they are to function as responsible infrastructures for knowledge, meaning, public reason, and planetary stewardship?

This article argues that many higher education systems remain governed by what may be called a scarcity model. By scarcity model, I mean an institutional logic in which knowledge is treated as scarce and primarily transmitted, credentials are treated as durable signals of competence, and institutional success is measured through economic productivity, reputation, and throughput. The model is not wrong in every respect. Knowledge remains unevenly distributed; credentials still matter; economic outcomes cannot be dismissed. The problem is that the model is too narrow to organize higher education in an age when information is abundant, intelligence is increasingly artificial, work is reconfigured by automation, and the risks associated with decisions are planetary in scale [16,21–23].

The contrast between knowledge scarcity and cognitive abundance should therefore be read as a relative and diagnostic distinction, not as a claim that scarcity has disappeared. Generative AI expands access to drafting, summarisation, translation, tutoring, and simulation, but trustworthy knowledge, disciplinary expertise, high-quality infrastructure, language coverage, paid tools, data rights, and institutional power remain unevenly distributed. AI may therefore create new concentrations of advantage even while making some forms of cognitive assistance more widely available. This qualification is essential to the article's justice-oriented account of stewardship.

The deeper failure is therefore not that universities have stopped producing knowledge. It is that higher education systems have underinvested in the formation of wisdom, meaning, ethical judgement, and life-preserving responsibility. The danger is a widening power-wisdom gap: technical and institutional power increases faster than the human capacities required to govern that power well [24–27]. This gap is especially significant for universities because they educate those who will design technologies, run institutions, in-

interpret evidence, make policy, shape culture, and act within professions whose cumulative decisions structure future social conditions.

In this article, wisdom is understood as reflective, value-mediated judgement oriented toward shared goods under conditions of uncertainty. It includes cognitive discernment, ethical responsibility, perspective-taking, humility about limits, and the capacity to deliberate about consequences across persons, institutions, and generations. This definition draws on wisdom research while remaining educationally practical: wisdom is not treated as a private virtue alone, but as a learnable and institutionally supported capacity for responsible judgement [25,27].

The article makes four contributions. First, it provides an embedded systematized scoping review and conceptual synthesis connecting literatures that are often examined separately: higher education purpose, artificial intelligence, futures and foresight, sustainability transitions, human flourishing, wisdom science, and institutional metrics. Second, it diagnoses structural misalignments between the scarcity model and emerging global conditions. Third, it proposes flourishing stewardship as a first principle for higher education. Fourth, it develops the Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model (FSTM), a conceptual model intended to guide research, institutional strategy, and policy experimentation.

The distinctive contribution of flourishing stewardship and the FSTM is not that they replace neighbouring frameworks such as the ecological university, public-good higher education, responsible innovation, sustainability competencies, or human flourishing. Rather, the framework extends them in four ways: first, it names the power–wisdom gap as the central educational misalignment under conditions of AI-enabled and institutionally amplified capability; second, it links individual formation capacities with institutional transformation levers; third, it treats AI governance as inseparable from educational purpose rather than as a technical compliance problem; and fourth, it translates a normative first principle into design questions, indicators, and propositions for empirical testing. The contribution is therefore integrative and operationalizing: it offers a bridge between purpose theory, socio-technical transition thinking, and institutional redesign.

This article contributes to technological forecasting and social change by shifting attention from forecasting technological capabilities to forecasting the institutional formation capacities required to govern those capabilities responsibly.

It is positioned at the intersection of technological forecasting, social change, and higher education futures. It contributes to technological forecasting by reframing the central problem from predicting technological trajectories to understanding the institutional and human capacities required to govern their consequences. This positioning matters because debates about universities are often separated from debates about technology governance, labour transformation, responsible innovation, and sustainability transitions. Such separation is no longer defensible. The future of work cannot be understood without education; the future of AI cannot be governed without human formation; the future of sustainability cannot be advanced without institutions capable of educating for long-term responsibility [28–32].

For the field of technological forecasting, the article contributes by shifting attention from forecasting technological capabilities alone to forecasting the institutional capacities needed to govern their social effects. AI is not only a tool introduced into existing universities; it changes the value of knowledge, the meaning of authorship, the design of assessment, the skills demanded in labour markets, and the forms of judgement needed in professions [6,10,19,20,33]. Forecasting these changes requires attention to the educational systems that form future users, designers, regulators, and citizens.

For social change theory, the article contributes by treating higher education as a socio-technical transition infrastructure. Transitions research has shown that system trans-

formation involves not only new technologies but also institutions, practices, meanings, policies, and user capabilities [28,30]. Higher education participates in each of these dimensions. Universities shape meanings of progress, legitimate expertise, train professionals, produce research, influence policy, and distribute status. A transformation in higher education is therefore not simply an internal sectoral reform. It is part of how societies adapt to and steer technological change.

For system transformation, the article offers a model that connects external transition conditions to institutional levers. It does not claim that higher education can solve AI risk, climate change, or democratic decline alone. Rather, it argues that higher education is a leverage point because it forms the people and institutions through which these challenges are interpreted and acted upon. This makes the university neither a neutral provider of credentials nor a detached knowledge factory, but a site where future agency is constructed [1,34,35].

2. Methodology: Embedded Systematized Scoping Review and Conceptual Synthesis

The study is a conceptual paper with an embedded systematized scoping review. A conceptual design is appropriate because the research question asks how higher education should be reframed under emerging socio-technical conditions rather than whether a single intervention produces a measurable effect. The review is systematized because it uses transparent search domains, search strings, inclusion criteria, coding categories, and synthesis logic; it is scoping because the aim is to map and integrate heterogeneous literatures rather than to conduct a meta-analysis of comparable empirical studies [36–39]. PRISMA 2020 and PRISMA-ScR informed the transparency and reporting logic of the review process, while the article remains a theory-building manuscript rather than a stand-alone systematic review of intervention effects [40,41].

Searches and verification were conducted across bibliographic and open scholarly platforms, including Google Scholar, Crossref, ERIC, PubMed, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online, alongside organizational repositories from UNESCO, OECD, ILO, IPCC, and Stanford HAI. The same search strings were structured so that the search could be replicated in Scopus and Web of Science by authors or reviewers with institutional access. Because the manuscript develops an integrative conceptual model, backward and forward citation chaining was used from high-relevance sources in higher education purpose, futures, AI governance, sustainability transitions, and flourishing research.

Example search strings included: (“higher education” OR universit*) AND (future* OR foresight OR transformation) AND (AI OR “artificial intelligence” OR “generative AI”); (“higher education” OR universit*) AND (flourishing OR wellbeing OR “human development” OR wisdom OR meaning); (“higher education” OR universit*) AND (“sustainability transitions” OR “planetary boundaries” OR stewardship); (“artificial intelligence” OR “generative AI”) AND (education OR university) AND (ethics OR governance OR assessment); and (metric* OR ranking* OR accountability) AND (“higher education” OR universit*) AND (quality OR purpose OR “public good”). Searches emphasized publications from 2000 to 2026, with older foundational sources retained where they were conceptually necessary, such as Dewey (1916), Goodhart (1975), and Freire (1970) [42–44].

Sources were eligible when they addressed at least one of four analytic questions: (1) what external transition conditions are changing the purpose of higher education; (2) how AI and socio-technical change affect knowledge, work and assessment; (3) what human capacities are needed for responsible agency under uncertainty and power; and (4) what institutional levers could translate these capacities into system change. Sources were excluded when they focused only on school-level education without implications for

higher education, described technology adoption without institutional or formative implications, discussed well-being without educational relevance, or addressed sustainability without connection to human capability, governance, or higher education.

The screening process produced a final conceptual corpus of 78 sources. These included empirical studies, conceptual articles, systematic and scoping reviews, books, and policy reports. Sources were coded in a spreadsheet using seven categories: problem diagnosis, mechanism of change, human capacity, institutional lever, level of action, model implication, and evidentiary function. Two stages of screening were used. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance to the four analytic questions. Second, full texts were examined for conceptual fit, evidential contribution, and usefulness for model construction. Duplicate records were removed manually by comparing author names, titles, publication year, and DOI or publisher details. Where multiple versions of a source existed, the most authoritative or most recent version was retained.

Coding was conducted abductively. The initial coding categories were derived from the research question and the six literature domains; these categories were then refined as recurring mechanisms appeared across sources. For example, sources on AI and labour transformation informed the transition condition of cognitive abundance and the technological capacity component; sources on flourishing and wisdom informed the ethical and existential formation capacities; and sources on metrics and governance informed the institutional levers and accountability indicators. The final FSTM components therefore emerged from repeated comparison between coded evidence streams and the conceptual problem of the power–wisdom gap, rather than from a single prior theory.

After removal of duplicates and non-relevant entries based on titles and abstracts, 214 records were retained for full-text screening. Applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in a final conceptual corpus of 78 sources. The corpus does not correspond mechanically to every item in the reference list, because some cited works provide methodological, definitional, or contextual support, while the corpus refers to the sources used directly in thematic mapping and model construction.

The review is embedded within a theory-building design; its purpose is to inform conceptual integration rather than to exhaustively catalogue all available evidence (Table 1).

Table 1. Review protocol for the embedded systematized scoping review.

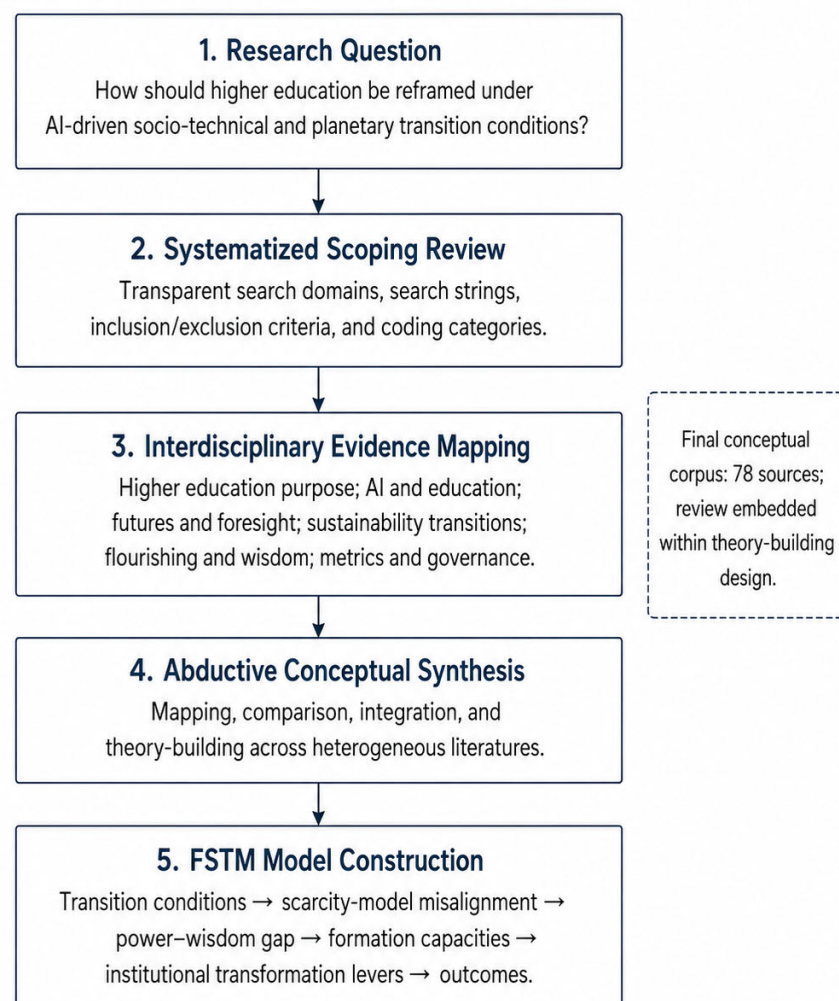
Review Element	Specification
Review type	Embedded systematized scoping review and conceptual synthesis for theory building, not a meta-analysis of intervention effects.
Platforms and sources	Google Scholar, Crossref, ERIC, PubMed, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and organizational repositories from UNESCO, OECD, ILO, IPCC and Stanford HAI; search strings are formatted for Scopus/Web of Science replication.
Time window	Main emphasis on 2000–2026, with older foundational sources retained where essential to theory or method.
Example search terms	higher education, university futures, artificial intelligence, generative AI, flourishing, wellbeing, wisdom, stewardship, sustainability transitions, planetary boundaries, metrics, accountability, governance.
Inclusion criteria	Sources addressing higher education purpose, AI and education, futures/foresight, sustainability transitions, flourishing/wisdom, or metrics in ways relevant to the article question.
Exclusion criteria	Sources limited to school education, narrow technology adoption, wellbeing without educational relevance, or sustainability without institutional/human-capability implications.
Coding categories	Problem diagnosis; mechanism of change; human capacity; institutional lever; level of action; model implication; evidentiary function.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Review Element	Specification
Synthesis logic	Thematic mapping followed by abductive model construction linking transition conditions, scarcity-model misalignment, the power-wisdom gap, capacities, levers and outcomes.
Screening and deduplication	Two-stage title/abstract and full-text screening; duplicates removed through manual comparison of author, title, year, DOI and publisher details.
Traceability procedure	Each included source was coded for problem diagnosis, mechanism of change, human capacity, institutional lever, level of action, model implication and evidentiary function; coded patterns were then mapped to FSTM components.
Supplementary transparency	A fuller search log, coding spreadsheet or traceability matrix can be made available as supplementary material if required by the journal.

Figure 1 below summarizes how the embedded systematized scoping review informed the abductive construction of the FSTM. The process is intended to support conceptual integration and theory development, not meta-analysis (see Table 2).

From Systematized Scoping Review to Conceptual Model Construction



Purpose: conceptual integration and model development, not meta-analysis.

Figure 1. From systematized scoping review to conceptual model construction.

Table 2. Traceability between coded evidence streams and FSTM components.

Evidence Stream/Analytic Question	Main Coding Categories Used	FSTM Component Informed	Function in the Model
AI, labour and epistemic change	Problem diagnosis; mechanism of change; human capacity	Transition conditions; technological capacity; power-wisdom gap	Shows why cognitive abundance changes the value of judgement, authorship and oversight.
Higher education purpose and public good	Problem diagnosis; level of action; evidentiary function	Scarcity-model misalignment; outcomes	Establishes why human-capital and credential logics are insufficient as first principles.
Flourishing and wisdom research	Human capacity; model implication; evidentiary function	Epistemic, ethical and existential capacities	Defines formation as multidimensional, teachable and partially assessable.
Sustainability transitions and planetary risk	Mechanism of change; level of action; institutional lever	Ecological capacity; transition conditions; outcomes	Links professional formation to long-horizon and life-preserving responsibility.
Futures, foresight and responsible innovation	Mechanism of change; institutional lever	Civic capacity; governance and purpose	Supports anticipatory, inclusive and responsive institutional redesign.
Metrics and accountability	Institutional lever; evidentiary function	Metrics; outcomes; feedback loop	Explains how indicators can support or distort educational purpose.

Synthesis of Review Findings

Six evidence streams emerged. First, higher education purpose literature shows a persistent tension between the university as a public-good institution and the university as a market actor. Barnett’s account of supercomplexity and the ecological university, Biesta’s critique of measurement without purpose, Nussbaum’s defence of democratic humanistic education, and Marginson’s common-good framing converge on a key claim: the purpose of higher education cannot be reduced to economic output without weakening civic, epistemic, and human-development functions [1–3,34,35,45–48].

Second, AI and labour-transformation literature indicates a shift from knowledge scarcity to cognitive abundance. AI can increase productivity, automate tasks, support tutoring, and widen access, but it also raises risks of epistemic outsourcing, bias, surveillance, labour disruption, and irresponsible automation [6,7,15,19,20,23,33,49]. UNESCO and OECD policy work further suggests that AI literacy, human oversight, and inclusive reskilling are now educational necessities rather than specialist options [10,17,18].

This stream also shows why a simple adoption narrative is inadequate. Recent higher education debates emphasize that generative AI can support feedback, accessibility, language learning, and cognitive scaffolding while also creating unresolved questions about academic integrity, assessment validity, digital inequality, surveillance, teacher readiness, and student well-being. These tensions justify the FSTM’s emphasis on formation capacities and institutional levers rather than tool use alone.

Third, futures, foresight, and transition literatures emphasize that the future is not a single predicted state but a field of possibilities shaped by present choices, institutions, and imaginaries [49–53]. Responsible innovation and transition studies add that steering socio-technical change requires anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness [28,30–32,54]. This stream supports the article’s claim that universities should not merely adapt to future technologies; they should help societies govern them.

Fourth, sustainability and planetary-risk literature shows that education must be judged by its contribution to long-term habitability and just transition. Planetary boundaries, safe and just Earth system boundaries, and IPCC synthesis findings indicate that ecological conditions are not external to higher education; they are conditions that define responsible professional practice and institutional legitimacy [11–13,55,56]. Sustainability-competence literature further identifies systems thinking, anticipatory thinking, normative

competence, and strategic competence as central to educating for complex socio-ecological problems [14,57].

Fifth, flourishing and wisdom literatures provide a human-development vocabulary that supplements narrow skills discourse. Flourishing is multidimensional, involving health, life satisfaction, meaning, character, and relationships [58]. Self-determination theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as conditions of motivation and well-being [59]. Wisdom research emphasizes value-mediated judgement directed toward common goods, integrating cognitive, reflective, and prosocial capacities [25,27]. Recent higher education studies indicate that learning experiences, service-learning, and explicit flourishing education can be associated with meaning, well-being, and formation [55–60].

Sixth, metrics and governance literature show that what institutions measure becomes a powerful force in what they become. Goodhart’s law, critiques of audit culture, and responsible metrics initiatives warn that indicators distort purpose when proxies replace judgement [43,61–63]. For higher education, this implies that transformation toward flourishing stewardship will fail if rankings, graduate salary, publication counts, and grant income remain the dominant signals of success (see Table 3).

Table 3. Evidence streams informing the conceptual synthesis.

Evidence Stream	Representative Sources	Implication for the Model
Higher education purpose and public good	[1–3,34,35,45–48]	Purpose cannot be reduced to human capital, market competition or reputational performance.
AI, labour and epistemic change	[6,7,10,15,16,19–21,23,33]	AI shifts university value from information delivery toward judgement, authorship, oversight and responsible agency.
Futures, foresight and transition governance	[28,30–32,49,50,52,54]	Higher education should build anticipatory and governance capacities rather than only adapt to predicted labour demand.
Sustainability and planetary limits	[11,13,14,55–57]	Universities must educate for life-preserving professional and civic action under ecological constraint.
Flourishing, wellbeing and wisdom	[25,27,58,59,64–68]	Formation can be specified as multidimensional, teachable and partially assessable without reducing education to therapy.
Metrics and institutional accountability	[3,43,61–63,69]	Institutional redesign requires plural metrics that support rather than replace judgement about educational value.

3. Diagnosis: Scarcity-Model Misalignment and the Power-Wisdom Gap

The synthesis suggests that higher education is misaligned with emerging conditions in five interlocking ways. The first is epistemic. Universities often continue to teach as if the central educational problem were access to information. Yet, students increasingly inhabit environments of retrieval, simulation, synthesis, and generative production. Under these conditions, the distinctive value of higher education lies less in delivering content and more in cultivating disciplined judgement, epistemic humility, interpretive depth, and the capacity to evaluate claims under uncertainty [6,10,20].

The second misalignment is credentialist. Degrees remain socially powerful, but they no longer provide stable guarantees of durable occupational competence. AI and automation alter task structures; OECD evidence suggests that skill demands evolve faster than policy cycles; and ILO analysis indicates that generative AI is likely to transform the task content of many occupations [16,18,21]. A university degree therefore needs to represent a capacity for lifelong adaptation, ethical learning, and responsible tool use, not merely prior content acquisition.

The third misalignment is anthropological. Much policy discourse still treats students as human capital: bundles of skills to be matched to labour-market needs. This framing is partially useful but morally insufficient. Students are also persons seeking meaning, citizens participating in institutions, relational beings embedded in communities, and future professionals whose decisions affect the well-being of others. Human capital theory cannot by itself account for these dimensions [61–63,70–73].

The fourth misalignment is temporal. Many institutions are optimized for short-cycle performance: annual rankings, recruitment metrics, graduate salaries, publication outputs, and budgetary targets. Yet the defining problems of the century are long-horizon, intergenerational, and systemic. Climate stability, democratic trust, AI governance, and social cohesion cannot be adequately addressed by institutions whose success signals reward short-term reputation and throughput [12,61–63].

The fifth misalignment is ethical and existential. Knowledge production can be decoupled from wisdom. Technical capability can grow without meaning, purpose, or responsibility. The university can produce experts who know how to optimize but not why, for whom, at what cost, or within what limits. This is the power–wisdom gap. It is not a romantic criticism of science or technology; it is a structural observation about the social consequences of powerful knowledge without adequately formed judgement [24–27].

This diagnosis also explains why merely adding AI modules, sustainability modules, or well-being services will not be enough. These responses may be valuable, but they remain fragmented if they do not reorganize institutional purpose. The issue is not only that universities need new content. It is that their underlying model of value must change. The marginal public value of higher education in the coming decades may lie less in transmitting scarce knowledge and more in cultivating persons and institutions capable of governing abundant power (see Table 4).

Table 4. From the scarcity model to the flourishing stewardship model.

Dimension	Scarcity Model	Flourishing Stewardship Model
Purpose	Transmission, certification and economic contribution.	Formation of wise, responsible and meaning-oriented agency for shared flourishing.
Knowledge	Scarce content transferred from expert to learner.	Abundant and contested knowledge requiring interpretation, judgement and ethical use.
Student identity	Performer, consumer or employable human capital.	Person, citizen, professional and steward of consequence.
AI role	Tool for efficiency, cheating risk or administrative automation.	Socio-technical infrastructure governed by formation, responsibility and human oversight.
Curriculum	Disciplinary content plus employability skills.	Disciplinary depth integrated with ethics, futures literacy, sustainability, AI literacy and meaning.
Pedagogy	Instruction, assessment and credential production.	Practiced judgement through inquiry, dialogue, experience, reflection and public problem-solving.
Metrics	Rankings, salary, throughput, publications and grants.	Plural accountability for learning, flourishing, contribution, public value and ecological responsibility.

4. Flourishing Stewardship as a First Principle

This article proposes flourishing stewardship as a first principle for higher education. Flourishing stewardship is the cultivated capacity and commitment to pursue meaningful human lives while preserving and advancing the conditions of flourishing for others, democratic societies, and the living world. It combines two ideas that are too often separated. Flourishing insists that higher education must take whole-person development seriously; stewardship insists that such development is never merely private, because knowledge and power carry obligations across communities, institutions, technologies, and generations.

For assessment purposes, the key terms are used as follows. Flourishing refers to multidimensional human development involving meaning, purpose, health, character, relationships, and the capability to live lives people have reason to value. Well-being refers more specifically to the subjective, relational, and psychosocial conditions that support learning and life satisfaction. Stewardship refers to the responsible use of knowledge, technology, and professional power in ways that protect shared goods, future persons, and the living world. Flourishing stewardship therefore combines personal formation with responsibility for consequences.

Flourishing is not a synonym for happiness, comfort, or employability. VanderWeele [58] conceptualizes human flourishing as a multidimensional condition involving mental and physical health, happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. Ryan and Deci [55] show how autonomy, competence, and relatedness support motivation and well-being. Sen's capability approach emphasizes substantive freedom to live lives people have reason to value, while Nussbaum develops a human-development account that gives education a role beyond income generation [72,73]. These accounts help higher education move beyond narrow outcome indicators without abandoning rigor.

Stewardship adds the dimension of consequence. It asks how knowledge, technology, and professional power should be used when actions affect others and the future. Responsible innovation scholarship is especially relevant because it frames innovation in terms of anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness [31,32]. AI ethics frameworks similarly emphasize human dignity, transparency, fairness, human oversight, and environmental considerations [17,74,75]. In higher education, stewardship means that graduates should be able to ask not only whether something works, but whether it should be built, scaled, financed, governed, or refused.

Flourishing stewardship is pluralistic rather than paternalistic. It does not prescribe a single comprehensive doctrine of the good life. It does, however, reject the fiction that universities can be neutral about formation. Institutions already form students through what they reward, measure, ignore, and normalize. The question is whether formation remains implicit and governed by competition, anxiety, and optimization, or whether it is made explicit, deliberative, and accountable to defensible public purposes [3,66,73]. The concept of flourishing is inherently plural and culturally mediated; the model therefore treats flourishing stewardship as a normative orientation that requires contextual interpretation rather than a universally fixed standard.

Institutional interpretations of flourishing stewardship should therefore be developed participatorily rather than imposed from above. Students, staff, professional bodies, community partners, employers, policymakers, and underrepresented groups should have opportunities to deliberate about what responsible flourishing means in a specific programme, profession, or region. Such participation protects the framework from paternalism and aligns it with democratic public reason.

The principle also avoids reducing education to well-being services. Student mental health and support are crucial, but flourishing stewardship is not therapy by another name. It is an educational and institutional principle. It integrates disciplinary mastery, ethical reasoning, meaning, civic responsibility, ecological literacy, and technological judgement. In this sense, it recovers older humanistic and democratic purposes of education while updating them for conditions of AI, planetary interdependence, and socio-technical transition [4,42,44,47].

5. The Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model

The Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model (FSTM) translates the first principle into a system model. It is designed for use by researchers, institutional leaders, and policymakers who need a parsimonious but actionable structure for linking technological and planetary transition to higher education redesign. The model has six components: transition conditions, scarcity-model misalignment, the power–wisdom gap, formation capacities, institutional transformation levers, and outcomes. The model specifies directional analytical relationships rather than empirically validated causal effects: external conditions intensify misalignment; misalignment widens the power–wisdom gap; the gap identifies the capacities higher education must form; and institutional levers provide mechanisms through which those capacities can be developed and evaluated. The FSTM should therefore be interpreted as a heuristic framework for organizing inquiry and guiding empirical testing rather than as a confirmed causal model.

The first component identifies transition conditions: AI diffusion, planetary risk, labour transformation, epistemic disorder, and democratic fragility. These conditions are not background variables. They alter what knowledge is, how work is organized, what risks must be governed, and what kinds of public reasoning are required. The second component diagnoses scarcity-model misalignment: transmission, credentialism, and productivity proxies no longer provide a sufficient organizing logic. The third component identifies the power–wisdom gap as the central mechanism connecting external change to educational purpose.

The fourth component specifies six formation capacities. Epistemic capacity refers to disciplinary depth, evidence literacy, uncertainty reasoning, and intellectual humility. Ethical capacity refers to responsibility, moral reasoning, integrity, and consequence awareness. Existential capacity refers to meaning, purpose, vocation, and reflective identity. Civic capacity refers to pluralism, democratic dialogue, institutional trust, and public reason. Ecological capacity refers to systems thinking, interdependence, and responsibility for the living world. Technological capacity refers to AI literacy, human oversight, data awareness, and the ability to govern technology rather than merely use it.

Existential capacity does not mean that universities should prescribe a single conception of the good life. It refers to students' ability to reflect on meaning, vocation, identity, limits, uncertainty, and responsibility in relation to their field of study and future professional power. Educationally, it can be supported through reflective portfolios, mentoring, community-engaged learning, professional identity work, and structured dialogue about values and consequences.

The fifth component identifies five institutional transformation levers: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, purpose and governance, metrics, and AI governance. The model's central claim is that formation capacities will not develop at scale through rhetoric alone. They require institutional levers aligned with the first principle. Conversely, AI adoption, sustainability initiatives, and well-being policies will remain fragmented unless they are connected to a coherent account of what higher education is for.

The sixth component concerns outcomes: responsible agency, public value, democratic resilience, human flourishing, and planetary flourishing. These outcomes should not be interpreted as simple causal endpoints. They are evaluative horizons that guide institutional design and empirical inquiry. The feedback arrow in Figure 2 indicates that evidence from implementation should revise the model, because the FSTM is a heuristic for structured learning rather than a totalizing theory. While the model integrates multiple domains, it does not assume that all mechanisms operate uniformly across contexts; rather, it provides a structured way to examine how different dimensions interact under specific institutional and socio-technical conditions.

The Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model (FSTM)

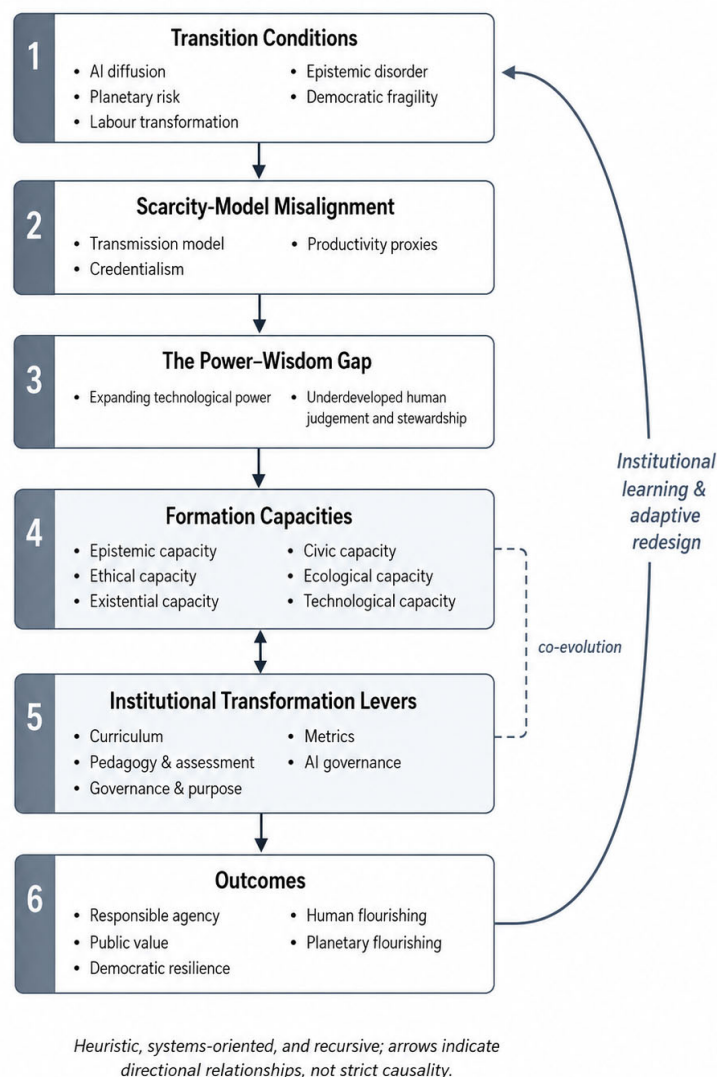


Figure 2. The Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model (FSTM) visualized.

The feedback loop indicates that outcomes inform ongoing institutional learning, making the model recursive rather than strictly linear (see Tables 5 and 6, and Figure 2).

Table 5. Operationalizing the Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model.

Model Component	Definition	Researchable Indicators
Transition conditions	External forces changing the meaning and consequence of higher education: AI, planetary risk, labour transformation, epistemic disorder, and democratic fragility.	Institutional horizon scanning; AI exposure of programmes; climate-risk relevance; public-trust indicators.
Scarcity-model misalignment	The gap between transmission/credential/productivity logics and conditions of cognitive abundance and systemic risk.	Assessment design, degree architecture, ranking dependence, employment-metric dominance.
Power-wisdom gap	The condition in which technical capability and institutional power scale faster than ethical, existential, civic, and ecological maturity.	Evidence of ethical reasoning, judgement under uncertainty, reflective decision-making, stewardship practice.
Formation capacities	Epistemic, ethical, existential, civic, ecological, and technological capacities.	Rubrics, portfolios, capstones, surveys, observed practice, viva-style defences, community feedback.
Transformation levers	Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, governance, metrics, and AI governance.	Curriculum maps, promotion criteria, assessment rules, AI policies, public-value indicators.
Outcomes	Responsible agency, public value, democratic resilience, and shared human and planetary flourishing.	Graduate contribution, civic participation, responsible innovation, sustainability competence, wellbeing evidence.

Table 6. Indicative input and output indicators for formation capacities across a programme cycle.

Formation Capacity	Input Indicators	Output Indicators over 3–4 Years	Possible Evidence Sources
Epistemic	Curriculum mapping of evidence literacy, uncertainty reasoning, and disciplinary judgement; staff development in AI-aware assessment.	Improved performance in source evaluation, viva defence, uncertainty reasoning, capstone inquiry, and reflective judgement.	Rubrics, portfolios, oral examinations, capstones, external examiner reports.
Ethical	Embedded ethics cases, professional codes, consequence analysis, and AI-use declarations across modules.	Demonstrated capacity to identify stakeholders, justify decisions, disclose AI use, and reason about harms and trade-offs.	Case analyses, reflective logs, professional simulations, integrity records.
Existential	Structured reflection on vocation, meaning, professional identity, and limits of expertise.	Clearer articulation of purpose, professional responsibility, and learning goals without imposing a single conception of the good life.	Reflective portfolios, mentoring records, student surveys, qualitative interviews.
Civic	Dialogic pedagogy, community engagement, deliberation exercises, and pluralism training.	Improved participation in reasoned disagreement, public problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making.	Community partner feedback, group project assessment, civic engagement records.
Ecological	Sustainability learning outcomes, systems thinking, lifecycle analysis, and climate-risk relevance in programmes.	Demonstrated ability to connect disciplinary decisions to ecological limits, interdependence, and just transition.	Sustainability competence rubrics, project outputs, placements, programme review.
Technological	AI literacy, data awareness, human oversight, and tool-specific guidance integrated into assessment.	Responsible AI use, source verification, authorship transparency, and capacity to evaluate model limitations.	AI-use statements, audit trails, oral defences, digital portfolios, assessment moderation.

The FSTM links transition conditions, scarcity-model misalignment, the power–wisdom gap, formation capacities, institutional transformation levers, and outcomes. Arrows indicate directional analytical relationships for heuristic inquiry and empirical testing, not confirmed causal effects. The feedback loop represents institutional learning and adaptive redesign. The arrows in the FSTM indicate directional analytical relationships for theory-building and empirical inquiry, not validated causal pathways.

Concrete Illustrations of the FSTM in Programme and Policy Design

The FSTM can be used as a diagnostic and design heuristic across different disciplinary and institutional contexts. The following brief illustrations show how the model translates from a general framework into concrete questions for programme design, assessment, and governance. They are not presented as empirical case studies, but as examples of how the model can guide structured institutional inquiry.

AI assessment redesign. In programmes where generative AI can produce essays, summaries, code, or design proposals, the transition condition is cognitive abundance. The scarcity-model misalignment appears when assessment continues to treat final written outputs as reliable evidence of individual understanding. The power–wisdom gap emerges when students can produce plausible work without developing authorship, judgement, or responsibility. An FSTM-informed redesign would use institutional levers such as assessment policy, pedagogy, and AI governance to require process evidence, annotated AI-use statements, oral defence, reflective commentary, and contextual application. The relevant formation capacities include epistemic capacity, technological capacity, and ethical capacity. The intended outcome is not AI prohibition, but responsible agency: students learn when and how to use AI without surrendering judgement or authorship.

Medical and health-professions education. In medicine, nursing, physiotherapy and allied health, AI-supported diagnostics, and decision-support tools are becoming increasingly available. The transition condition is not simply technological adoption, but the redistribution of clinical judgement across human and machine systems. Scarcity-model misalignment occurs if programmes remain focused mainly on technical knowledge and procedural competence without sufficient attention to uncertainty, vulnerability, patient communication, and ethical consequences. An FSTM approach would integrate AI literacy, clinical ethics, reflective practice, and patient-centred simulation into curriculum and assessment. Formation capacities would include epistemic, ethical, existential, and technological capacities. The intended outcome is a graduate who can use decision-support systems

critically while maintaining responsibility for humane care, professional accountability, and patient dignity.

Engineering ethics and infrastructure design. Engineering programmes give graduates significant power to shape built environments, energy systems, transport, data infrastructures, and material flows. The transition conditions include planetary risk, labour transformation, and AI-enabled modelling. Scarcity-model misalignment appears when engineering education emphasizes technical optimization without sufficiently foregrounding ecological limits, public safety, social justice, and long-term consequence. The FSTM would prompt programme teams to ask what forms of power the curriculum gives graduates and what stewardship capacities are needed for that power to be used well. Institutional levers could include sustainability-oriented design studios, community-based infrastructure projects, lifecycle assessment, ethics of automation, and public-impact review. The key capacities are ecological, ethical, epistemic, and civic. The intended outcome is engineering judgement-oriented, not only to performance and efficiency, but to public value and planetary responsibility.

Sustainability governance in university strategy. At institutional level, universities often maintain separate strategies for sustainability, digital transformation, student well-being and employability. The transition condition is systemic: climate risk, AI adoption, and institutional trust pressures interact. Scarcity-model misalignment appears when these strategies are managed as disconnected initiatives rather than as part of a coherent purpose. The FSTM would treat governance and metrics as central transformation levers. A university could use the model as an alignment audit, asking whether curriculum, estates, research priorities, procurement, AI policy, student support, and promotion criteria all point toward flourishing stewardship. The relevant formation capacities are not confined to students; they also apply to institutional learning. The intended outcomes are public value, ecological responsibility, and more coherent institutional accountability.

AI-assisted law education. Legal education is directly affected by generative AI tools capable of drafting contracts, summarizing cases, generating legal arguments, and supporting legal research. The transition condition is the automation of parts of professional reasoning and documentation. Scarcity-model misalignment appears when legal education continues to assess only doctrinal recall or generic written analysis without testing professional judgement, ethical responsibility, and contextual interpretation. The FSTM would support assessment designs involving AI-assisted drafting followed by critique, source verification, client-risk analysis, oral defence, and reflection on professional responsibility. Formation capacities would include epistemic, ethical, civic, and technological capacities. The desired outcome is not simply efficient legal work, but graduates who can govern AI-supported practice in ways that protect justice, accountability, and public trust.

Together, these illustrations show that flourishing stewardship does not prescribe one uniform curriculum. Rather, it provides a common design logic: identify the forms of power a programme or institution distributes, diagnose where existing structures assume outdated scarcity conditions, and align curriculum, assessment, governance, metrics, and AI policy with the formation capacities needed for responsible agency.

6. Implications for System Redesign

A curriculum organized around flourishing stewardship would not abandon disciplinary depth. On the contrary, it would protect it, because responsible judgement requires substantive knowledge. The shift is that disciplinary knowledge would be taught in relation to consequence. Students would learn not only the internal logic of a field but also its histories, assumptions, externalities, and obligations. Engineering would include social and ecological consequences; business would include dignity, trust, and long-term value;

computer science would include bias, labour, privacy, and governance; health professions would include vulnerability, equity, and institutional ethics; education would include democracy, inclusion, and meaning [14,35,57].

A common formation core would be needed across programmes. Such a core need not be a generic set of soft skills. It should be intellectually demanding and organized around the major conditions shaping the future: AI and data; climate and biodiversity; democratic public reason; global inequality; health and vulnerability; peace and conflict; and meaning, vocation, and responsibility. This echoes UNESCO's call for a new social contract for education and its higher education roadmap, both of which connect education to equity, critical thinking, human-centred AI, collaboration, sustainability, stewardship, and enriched understandings of quality [4,5].

AI literacy and ecological literacy should become universal graduate outcomes. AI literacy should include model limitations, bias, privacy, intellectual property, automation, labour consequences, human oversight, and responsible use. Ecological literacy should include systems interdependence, planetary boundaries, climate risk, biodiversity, and just transition. Both forms of literacy should be integrated into disciplinary contexts rather than treated as optional modules [10,11,23,74].

Flourishing stewardship also requires pedagogies through which students practice judgement under uncertainty. Lectures and technical instruction remain useful, but they are insufficient if students never deliberate, frame problems, encounter real stakeholders, defend decisions, or reflect on failure. Relevant pedagogies include case-based learning, project-based learning, experiential learning, community engagement, studio critique, simulation, reflective writing, oral defence, and interdisciplinary inquiry [42,44,76,77].

Generative AI intensifies the need for assessment redesign. Assessments that reward generic synthesis, formulaic essays, or decontextualized take-home responses can be completed with AI assistance in ways that obscure understanding. The answer is not blanket prohibition. It is assessment that requires process evidence, authorship, oral defence, contextual judgement, iteration, application, and responsible tool use. Students should be asked not only to submit outputs but to explain decisions, limitations, values, and consequences [6,10].

Pedagogy also has a relational dimension. Students do not become responsible agents through content alone. They are shaped by environments of trust, feedback, belonging, and recognition. Flourishing research indicates that relationships, meaning, and character are core dimensions of well-being, and higher education evidence suggests that learning experiences can shape flourishing in measurable ways [58,59,65,67]. Higher education therefore needs learning environments that support challenges without disposability, rigor without humiliation, and excellence without chronic alienation.

Institutional purpose and governance must also change. Universities should understand themselves as civilizational infrastructure, not in the sense of becoming ideological agencies, but in recognizing that they help societies reproduce knowledge, expertise, public reason, and future-making capacity. Institutional governance should align teaching, research, and engagement around public value. Research agendas should be encouraged to address long-term social and ecological challenges without sacrificing basic inquiry. Teaching should integrate disciplinary mastery with ethical, civic, and technological judgement. Engagement should move beyond outreach toward reciprocal knowledge-making with communities, professions, and policymakers [1,34,35].

This institutional shift requires changes in academic work. Faculty cannot be expected to educate for stewardship, while promotion criteria reward only publication volume, grant income, and narrow disciplinary status. Institutions need recognition systems for excellent teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, community-engaged scholarship, responsible

AI innovation, and public-value research. Responsible metrics scholarship shows that indicators should support expert judgement rather than replace it, remain transparent about limitations, and reflect disciplinary and institutional diversity [61,63].

The model also requires plural accountability. Existing indicators such as employment rates, graduate salaries, publications, citations, internationalization, and research income measure important aspects of performance, but they do not capture the full public value of higher education. Worse, if treated as proxies for educational quality, they can distort institutional behaviour. Goodhart's law is directly relevant: when a measure becomes a target, it can cease to be a good measure [43,66]. A plural accountability framework should include learning, formation and contribution: AI literacy, sustainability competence, ethical reasoning, belonging, meaning, civic engagement, responsible research practices, public-value partnerships, and graduate contribution over time [3,66,69].

Finally, AI governance is the most immediate test of whether higher education can act from a coherent first principle. A flourishing-stewardship approach rejects both naive adoption and defensive prohibition. AI can support accessibility, formative feedback, translation, simulation, tutoring, administrative efficiency, and research assistance. It can also enable surveillance, deepen inequalities, intensify data extraction, weaken authorship, and outsource judgement [6,10,19,23,33].

The governing criterion should be formative: does the AI use strengthen or weaken the human capacities higher education is responsible for cultivating? AI should be encouraged when it expands access, supports feedback, reduces unnecessary administrative burden, or enables deeper inquiry without displacing judgement. It should be constrained when it undermines authorship, privacy, responsibility, intellectual struggle, or the ability to reason independently. This criterion translates general AI ethics principles into educational design [10,17,74,75]. The educational aim is not to produce humans who can compete with machines on every cognitive task. It is to form humans who can use intelligent systems without surrendering agency, judgement, or responsibility.

For policymakers, the FSTM implies that higher education strategy should be treated as part of responsible technology, skills, democracy, and sustainability policy rather than as a separate supply-side education agenda. Labour-market alignment remains important, but it should be nested within a broader public-value settlement. Quality assurance and funding systems can therefore ask institutions to evidence AI literacy, sustainability competence, ethical reasoning, student belonging, community engagement, and responsible research practices, using mixed methods rather than relying only on graduate salaries or research volume [5,18,69].

For institutional leaders, the FSTM functions as an alignment audit. Leaders can examine whether mission statements, programme approval, assessment policy, promotion criteria, digital strategy, sustainability commitments, and student support systems point in the same direction. If an institution speaks of well-being while rewarding chronic overwork, or speaks of AI ethics while adopting opaque platforms, the contradiction becomes an implementation problem rather than a rhetorical inconvenience. The model therefore supports strategic coherence, not another layer of symbolic compliance.

For programme teams, the model can be translated into a simple design question: what kinds of power does this curriculum give graduates, and what formation is required for that power to be used well? That question changes curriculum review from a content-coverage exercise into a responsibility-mapping exercise. It also allows disciplines to retain their specificity. Stewardship will not look identical in law, computer science, nursing, architecture, business, teacher education, or the humanities; the common principle is that each programme should make its own consequences visible, discussable, and assessable.

For forecasting researchers, the model invites scenario work that compares alternative university futures. One scenario is defensive credentialism, in which universities protect traditional assessment and degrees while AI changes the environment around them. A second is efficiency automation, in which universities digitize and personalize provision but leave purpose largely unchanged. A third is flourishing stewardship, in which AI, sustainability, and well-being are integrated into a theory of responsible agency. Comparing these futures would clarify the institutional choices available now and the social risks of path dependency.

Implementation will depend on institutional capacity, funding structures, regulatory environments, and political priorities; therefore, the model should be understood as a directional framework rather than a universally immediately actionable blueprint.

A further implementation risk is inequality. Institutions with stronger funding, digital infrastructure, data-governance expertise, and faculty development capacity will be better positioned to enact the FSTM than institutions already facing high teaching loads, precarious staffing, or limited student support. Faculty workload is especially important: assessment redesign, oral defence, portfolio feedback, AI governance, and community-engaged learning are educationally valuable but labour-intensive. The framework should therefore be implemented with resourcing, workload recognition, professional development, and equity-sensitive adaptation, otherwise flourishing stewardship could become another symbolic mandate that widens institutional inequalities.

7. Propositions and Research Agenda

7.1. Conceptual Propositions and Indicative Indicators

To support further research, the FSTM can be translated into propositions. These propositions are not presented as final hypotheses, but as agenda-setting claims for empirical testing, comparative case studies, forecasting exercises, and policy experimentation.

The propositions below separate normative and empirical claims. The normative claim is that higher education should orient its purposes toward flourishing stewardship under conditions of amplified power. The empirical claim is more limited: if institutions align curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, metrics, and AI governance with formation capacities, then observable changes in student learning, responsible agency, institutional coherence, and public value should become researchable. The propositions are therefore not presented as findings; they are testable claims for future empirical work.

Proposition 1: If AI increases cognitive abundance in higher education, then the marginal public value of universities will shift from information transmission toward judgement formation, because intelligent systems reduce the scarcity of content while increasing the importance of interpretation, authorship, and oversight [6,7,10].

Proposition 2: If higher education systems rely primarily on human-capital metrics, then they will underproduce ethical, civic, and ecological capacities, because proxy performance measures reward short-cycle outputs more readily than long-term public value and stewardship [3,61,62,69].

Proposition 3: If flourishing-oriented learning is integrated with disciplinary rigor rather than treated as student support alone, then both well-being and epistemic engagement are likely to improve, because meaning, autonomy, competence, and relatedness support motivation and sustained learning [59,65–67,69].

Proposition 4: If AI governance is evaluated by its effects on formation capacities rather than efficiency alone, then universities will adopt more responsible AI practices, because the criterion of human agency exposes hidden trade-offs in convenience, surveillance, authorship, and judgement [10,33,74,75].

Proposition 5: If curriculum, pedagogy, metrics, and governance are aligned around flourishing stewardship, then higher education institutions will be better positioned to contribute to sustainable and democratic futures, because fragmented initiatives will be integrated around a shared theory of purpose and transformation [1,5,28,35].

These propositions create a research agenda across multiple methods. Survey research could examine the relationship between learning environments, formation capacities, and student flourishing. Comparative case studies could investigate institutions that adopt AI governance, sustainability education, and well-being strategies as integrated transformation agendas. Design-based research could test assessment models that combine AI use with oral defence, reflective portfolios, and consequence analysis. Foresight research could examine how different university models influence possible labour, civic, and sustainability futures. Policy research could study whether funding and quality-assurance regimes incentivize or constrain flourishing stewardship (see Table 7).

Table 7. Indicative indicators and empirical designs for testing the propositions.

Proposition	Indicative Indicators	Possible Empirical Design
P1: Cognitive abundance shifts value toward judgement formation	AI-use patterns, assessment validity, source-evaluation quality, oral defence performance, authorship transparency.	Longitudinal assessment redesign studies; mixed-method course evaluations.
P2: Human-capital metrics underproduce stewardship capacities	Balance of institutional KPIs, presence of ethics/civic/ecological outcomes, promotion criteria, and programme approval requirements.	Comparative institutional case studies; policy analysis.
P3: Flourishing-oriented learning supports wellbeing and engagement	Meaning, belonging, autonomy, competence, relatedness, retention, engagement and learning quality.	Validated surveys combined with portfolio and achievement data.
P4: Formation-centred AI governance improves responsible use	AI literacy, disclosure quality, privacy awareness, reduced misconduct ambiguity, staff/student confidence.	Design-based research; policy implementation studies.
P5: Alignment around flourishing stewardship improves public-value contribution	Curriculum-policy alignment, community feedback, sustainability competence, graduate contribution, and institutional learning loops.	Foresight studies; longitudinal institutional transformation research.

7.2. Boundary Conditions and Limitations

The FSTM is a heuristic, not a totalizing solution. It does not claim that higher education can solve AI risk, climate change, inequality, or democratic decline alone. Nor does it imply that every university, discipline, or national system should adopt identical curricula or metrics. Its purpose is to help institutions ask better questions about alignment between purpose and practice under conditions of technological and planetary transition.

Several limits follow. First, flourishing is culturally and philosophically contested. The model therefore uses flourishing stewardship as a pluralistic orientation, not a single comprehensive doctrine. Future research should examine how the principle is interpreted across cultural, institutional, and disciplinary contexts [73,78]. Second, the article is conceptual and system-oriented. It proposes a model but does not empirically test it. Third, the embedded review is systematized and scoping rather than an exhaustive database-export systematic review with risk-of-bias appraisal. This is appropriate for conceptual synthesis across heterogeneous fields, but future work should conduct more bounded systematic reviews on specific components, such as AI assessment redesign, flourishing curricula, or stewardship metrics [37,40].

Future research should also examine how different groups interpret flourishing stewardship in practice. Participatory and cross-cultural studies are needed to test whether the framework can support plural institutional missions without becoming paternalistic, overly Western, or detached from local conditions.

Fourth, implementation constraints are substantial. Underfunded institutions may lack capacity for deep curriculum redesign, student support, AI governance, or public-value research. Any policy agenda must therefore include resources, faculty development, and equity-sensitive adaptation rather than moral exhortation alone. Fifth, some disciplines and professions already incorporate ethics, sustainability, and public responsibility more extensively than others. The model should therefore be used diagnostically rather than as a claim that all institutions start from the same baseline.

Finally, there is a risk of overextension. A model that connects AI, sustainability, flourishing, and governance can appear to explain too much. The safeguard is operationalization. The FSTM should be judged by whether it helps researchers specify variables, institutions design interventions, and policymakers align incentives. Its value is not rhetorical completeness but practical usefulness for structured experimentation.

The model is not intended to replace existing disciplinary or institutional frameworks but to provide an integrative layer through which their alignment with emerging conditions can be evaluated.

8. Conclusions

Higher education once helped societies manage knowledge scarcity. It now faces a more difficult task: helping societies govern power abundance. Artificial intelligence, planetary risk, and institutional fragility do not make universities obsolete. They make the formative purposes of universities unavoidable.

This article has argued that the dominant scarcity model of higher education is misaligned with emerging conditions. Knowledge transmission, credentialing, and economic productivity remain important, but they cannot function as first principles in an age when cognitive tools are widely available, work is reconfigured by automation, and human action has planetary consequences. The deeper failure is not a shortage of knowledge but a shortage of formation adequate to the powers higher education helps distribute.

Flourishing stewardship offers one response. It asks higher education to cultivate persons and institutions capable of pursuing meaningful lives while preserving and advancing the conditions for shared human and planetary flourishing. The Flourishing Stewardship Transformation Model translates this principle into a system framework linking transition conditions, misalignment, the power–wisdom gap, formation capacities, and institutional levers.

The model does not aim to exhaustively explain all dimensions of higher education transformation, but to provide a structured framework for examining alignment between purpose, capability, and institutional design.

The practical agenda is demanding. Curriculum must become consequence-rich. Pedagogy must cultivate practiced judgement. Metrics must move beyond proxy performance. AI must be governed as educational and ethical infrastructure, not merely as a tool. Institutions must understand themselves as socio-technical and civilizational infrastructure, responsible not only for producing knowledge but for forming the agents who will use knowledge and power. The future relevance of higher education will not be secured by becoming faster, more digital, or more employability-oriented alone. It will be secured by becoming wiser.

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