



WHAT IS THE UNIVERSITY FOR? ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, TRUTH, AND COLLABORATIVE FORMATION IN NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Before asking how Nigerian universities should respond to artificial intelligence (AI), it is worth asking a more basic question: what is a university actually for? This article argues that the university has never been simply a place for transferring information from one generation to the next, but has always aimed at the formation of minds capable of independent judgement, the pursuit of truth through disciplined inquiry, and the development of persons who can contribute responsibly to society. Drawing on philosophical accounts of higher education and empirical research on cognitive offloading, the article traces how generative AI unsettles this traditional mission through five distinct challenges: the reliability of assessment, the erosion of productive intellectual struggle, the risk of a hollowed-out education, the reframing of creativity, and the thinning of academic mentorship. The article reads these challenges theologically through Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, on the strength of collaborative rather than solitary effort, and Proverbs 1:7, on the fear of the Lord as the beginning of knowledge, arguing that Nigerian universities require both a collaborative, coordinated institutional response and a renewed grounding of intellectual formation in a truth that precedes and exceeds fluent output. The article concludes that Nigerian universities must articulate their purposes explicitly enough to judge any specific use of AI by whether it strengthens or weakens the human capacities higher education exists to cultivate.

Keywords: purpose of the university, artificial intelligence, intellectual formation, academic integrity, truth-seeking, Nigerian higher education

1. Introduction

Every generation of university leaders, teachers, and students inherits a set of assumptions about what higher education is supposed to accomplish, and every generation eventually has to test those assumptions against new circumstances. For Nigerian universities, the circumstance that now demands this kind of testing is the rapid, largely unplanned arrival of generative artificial intelligence into the ordinary business of teaching, learning, and research. This article argues that the university has never been simply a place for transferring information from one generation to the next; it has always aimed at something more demanding, the formation of minds capable of independent judgement, the pursuit of truth through disciplined inquiry, and the development of persons who can contribute responsibly to their societies. Artificial intelligence challenges this



understanding in ways that are still being worked out, and Nigerian universities must decide how to respond.

The question of purpose is not merely philosophical. Every decision about whether students may use an AI tool, how a project is to be assessed, or what a lecturer's feedback should contain rests on some assumption about what the university is trying to achieve. Where those assumptions are left unstated, decisions are made by default, and the default is usually whatever is convenient, cheap, or fashionable. Where they are stated, they can be argued over and improved.

The approach is philosophical and interpretive. It does not attempt to survey how Nigerian students and lecturers currently use AI, which is a task for empirical research, but to clarify the standards against which such evidence should be judged. Its claims are offered as an argument to be tested and not as findings.

Section 2 recalls the historical purposes of the university, including the additional purposes Nigerian institutions have been asked to carry. Section 3 examines the relation of knowledge, truth, and human development, with particular attention to the difference between useful and useless difficulty. Section 4 sets out five challenges that generative AI poses, and Section 5 considers the pull of efficiency and productivity. Section 6 reads the argument theologically, through Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 and Proverbs 1:7. Section 7 asks what Nigerian universities should do to reconsider their mission, and Section 8 concludes.

2. The Historical Purposes of the University

2.1 *Beyond Employment*

Universities did not originally exist to prepare people for jobs, although that has become one of their functions over time. What has remained fairly constant across a long and varied history is the idea that a university is meant to do something more than transmit facts. Philosophical accounts of higher education have long emphasised that being educated at university level involves developing the capacity to evaluate evidence, to see connections between different kinds of knowledge, and to hold one's own beliefs up to scrutiny (Barnett, 2010).

The idea of liberal education makes the point in its strongest form. Newman argued that the university exists to cultivate the intellect, to give students a comprehensive grasp of knowledge and the habit of mind to judge it, and that usefulness, though real, is a by-product and not the aim (Newman, 1996). One need not accept his whole account to see the force of the observation. A graduate who has learned only to reproduce information can be replaced by any device that stores it. A graduate who has learned to weigh evidence, to see how different fields bear on one another, and to revise a belief when it deserves revision has something that is hard to automate. The German tradition of *Bildung*, associated with Humboldt, likewise treated the university as a place where persons are formed through research and inquiry and not simply supplied with content.

2.2 *The Nigerian Layers*

Nigerian higher education carries additional layers of purpose connected to national development, expected since independence to produce graduates capable of driving economic growth and contributing to scientific advancement. These developmental expectations are legitimate, but they should not crowd out the more fundamental question of intellectual formation.

This developmental expectation has a long history. The Ashby Commission's 1960 report treated higher education as an investment in the high-level manpower needed by an independent Nigeria



(Federal Ministry of Education, 1960), and the first-generation universities were established in that spirit. The National Universities Commission's recent work on curriculum continues to stress skills, employability, and self-reliance, though alongside the cultivation of critical thinking and innovation (National Universities Commission, 2025).

2.3 Imported Models and Local Realities

A further, more local layer concerns the balance between imported academic models and Nigerian social and cultural realities, a balance complicated by the fact that most large language models have been trained overwhelmingly on material produced in the Global North, meaning that a student asking about a specifically Nigerian question may receive a generic or mistaken answer.

The point about imported models has practical consequences. Language models tend to reflect the viewpoints and languages most heavily represented in the text on which they are trained (Bender et al., 2021). A student who asks about a Nigerian statute, a local epidemiology, a regional history, or a question posed in Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo may receive an answer that is generic, out of date, or confidently wrong. This is not an argument against using the tools. It is an argument for teaching students to treat their output as a starting point for checking against Nigerian sources, and it is a reason why locally grounded scholarship remains indispensable. It also suggests that a university's Nigerian purposes, including the interpretation of its own society to itself, are among those least likely to be served by tools built elsewhere.

3. Knowledge, Truth, and Human Development

3.1 Truth as Ongoing Inquiry

At the centre of the university's historical mission sits a commitment to knowledge and truth, understood not as fixed facts to be memorised but as the product of ongoing inquiry, debate, and revision. A recent taxonomy of AI's role in higher education describes the mission of the university as sustaining the integrity, plurality, and social purpose of knowledge, warning that the slow work of reasoning, critique, and apprenticeship into disciplinary traditions cannot simply be automated away without cost.

This conception of knowledge has moral as well as intellectual dimensions. Inquiry into truth requires habits that are learned over time: patience with difficulty, honesty about what one does not know, willingness to be corrected, and courage to hold an unpopular conclusion when the evidence supports it (Kanu et al., 2025). These habits are formed by practice, in seminars, laboratories, and supervision, where students meet resistance from the material and from other minds. They are not delivered by a lecture or a document, and they cannot be handed over as a finished product. A university that graduates students with correct answers but without these habits has produced carriers of information and not educated persons.

Paulo Freire named the opposite of this ideal the "banking" model of education, in which teachers deposit content in passive students who store it and return it on demand (Freire, 1970). Generative AI can be seen as an automation of the banking model: it provides the deposit, and the student presents the withdrawal. An education that was already reduced to transfer and recall is the most exposed to it.

3.2 Difficulty That Builds and Difficulty That Does Not

This does not mean every difficulty a student faces is valuable simply because it is difficult; some obstacles, caused by poor teaching or inadequate resources, should be removed. The distinction that



matters is between difficulty that serves a genuine educational purpose and difficulty that serves none. The concern raised by generative AI is specific: that it risks removing the first kind of difficulty, namely the kind that actually builds intellectual capacity, precisely because it makes certain forms of assistance so effortless to obtain.

There is research that supports this distinction. Work on desirable difficulties suggests that conditions which make learning harder in the short term, such as spacing practice, retrieving material from memory, and mixing different kinds of problem, often improve long-term retention and transfer (Bjork, 1994). Studies of productive failure similarly report that, in some settings, students who struggle with a problem before receiving instruction learn more deeply than students who are given the solution first (Kapur, 2008; Kanu et al., 2026). What these lines of research share is the finding that effort spent in the right way is part of the mechanism of learning and not an unfortunate cost of it.

The relevance to AI is direct. A tool that supplies a fluent answer at the moment of struggle removes the retrieval, the false starts, and the correction on which such learning depends. The student may feel that she has understood, because the answer is clear, while the underlying structures have not been built. Feeling that one has understood and having understood are different states, and the difference is exactly what assessment is meant to reveal.

3.3 Formation as a Public Good

Formation is the word that best names what is at stake. To form a person intellectually is not merely to inform, but to shape capacities and dispositions: to read carefully, to argue fairly, to judge soundly, and to act responsibly on what one knows. It is also a public good. Societies depend on graduates who can tell reliable claims from unreliable ones, who can resist manipulation, and who can carry professional responsibility. In a country where graduates will lead schools, hospitals, courts, and ministries, the quality of their judgement is not a private matter.

4. How Artificial Intelligence Challenges Traditional Understandings of Higher Education

Generative AI unsettles the traditional picture of higher education in several related ways.

4.1 The Reliability of Assessment

First, it calls into question conventional assessment: final-year projects and theses, long treated as the capstone demonstration of a Nigerian graduate's independent research capability, are especially vulnerable, since a student now has the technical means to generate large sections of such work with minimal personal engagement unless supervisors build in more frequent, process-oriented checkpoints (Okonkwo et al., 2025).

The difficulty is compounded by the place of the final-year project in Nigerian degree programmes, where it often carries substantial weight and may be the only extended piece of independent work a student produces. Supervisors who see only finished chapters cannot tell how much was written by the student. Stage-based supervision, in which students present outlines, discuss data, and defend choices at fixed points, restores some of this visibility, but it requires supervisors to have time, and large supervision loads make that difficult.

4.2 The Erosion of Productive Struggle

Second, empirical research on the cognitive effects of AI use offers troubling evidence. A large-scale study found a significant negative correlation between frequent AI use and critical thinking



performance, with cognitive offloading identified as the key mechanism (Gerlich, 2025). A widely discussed neuroscientific study of essay writing found that participants who relied on a generative AI assistant showed weaker neural engagement and struggled to recall content from essays they had supposedly written themselves (Kosmyna et al., 2025).

It is important to state what these studies do and do not show. The first reports a correlation, and the second involved a small sample and a single task and was released as a preprint. Neither shows that AI use permanently damages thinking, and neither focuses on Nigerian students. What they do is give an empirical footing to a concern that educators have long held on theoretical grounds: that when a cognitive task is handed to a tool, the person may lose the practice that would have developed the capacity (Kanu and Pilani 2024). Whether that loss is offset by other gains is the kind of question on which local evidence is needed.

4.3 The Risk of a Hollowed-Out Education

Third, some commentators warn of a risk of hollowed-out education, in which universities continue to grant degrees and process students through familiar structures while the substantive intellectual content becomes increasingly generated by automated systems rather than genuinely mediated by human judgement (Sidorkin, 2025).

The phrase deserves to be taken seriously because the process it describes is gradual and does not require bad faith. A student submits AI-assisted work, a stretched lecturer marks it with AI-assisted feedback, and a system records a passing grade. Each step is understandable, and no one need intend to deceive anyone. Yet the certificate that results represents little of the human intellectual engagement it is supposed to represent, and the institution that grants it has quietly changed what it is.

4.4 The Reframing of Creativity

Fourth, and more hopefully, generative AI raises pressing questions about what creativity actually means once machines can produce novel combinations of existing ideas at scale, forcing a more careful distinction between originality as mere novelty and originality as a genuinely human act of judgement and meaning-making.

A useful distinction here is between novelty and originality. A system can produce combinations of words or images that no one has produced before, and in that sense the results are novel. Originality in the fuller sense involves a person's judgement that something is worth saying, an answer to a question that matters to someone, and a willingness to be accountable for it. Universities should teach students to seek originality in this second sense, and should assess for it.

4.5 The Thinning of Mentorship

Fifth, as AI tools take on tasks previously associated with direct human instruction, there is a risk that the mentoring relationship between lecturer and student becomes thinner and more transactional, even as students technically receive more immediate forms of academic support.

Mentorship is easy to overlook because it rarely appears in a curriculum document. It happens in office hours, in comments in the margin, in conversations after a seminar. It communicates that someone with more experience takes a student's thinking seriously, and it models how such a person reasons. Automated feedback can be accurate, fast, and available at any hour, but it cannot stand in



a relationship of responsibility to the student's development. If it replaces human feedback because it is cheaper, students will receive more comments and less mentorship.

The five challenges are related. Assessment becomes unreliable partly because productive struggle can be bypassed; struggle is bypassed partly because the tools make it effortless to do so; and a system that neither assesses reliably nor asks for struggle is at risk of hollowness. Creativity and mentorship are the positive side of the same question: what remains distinctively human in the educational relationship, and how can it be protected?

5. Efficiency and Productivity versus Intellectual Formation

5.1 The Language of Efficiency

Much of the public conversation about AI in universities is framed in the language of efficiency and productivity. There is nothing inherently wrong with efficiency, particularly in routine administration, but the difficulty arises when efficiency becomes the primary lens through which decisions about teaching, learning, and assessment are made. Institutional frameworks such as graduated assessment scales, distinguishing between different levels of acceptable AI assistance, offer one practical way of holding this balance in real academic settings (Perkins et al., 2024).

The value of such frameworks lies less in their categories than in the conversation they force: for each task, what is the student meant to learn, and what level of assistance leaves that learning intact? An answer presupposes the kind of explicit account of purpose for which this article argues.

Efficiency is a means, and a means is judged by the end it serves. To ask whether a tool saves time is a legitimate question only after asking what the time was for. Marking a script slowly may be inefficient in one sense and valuable in another, if the marker's attention to a student's reasoning is what the student most needs. The danger is not that universities measure efficiency but that measurable efficiency comes to stand in for the harder-to-measure goods that justify the institution.

5.2 Large Classes and Limited Staffing

Nigerian universities face a particular version of this tension because of large class sizes and limited staffing. The danger lies not in using AI tools at all, but in allowing their availability to quietly redefine what counts as adequate teaching and feedback, substituting genuine individualised engagement with speed.

It would be unfair to treat this as a failure of will. Lecturers facing several hundred students in a course, with little teaching assistance and heavy administrative duties, cannot give individual feedback of the kind that an ideal seminar would allow. In that setting AI-generated feedback may look like an answer to a real problem, and in some cases it may be a useful supplement. The test is whether it supplements or replaces. A lecturer who uses AI to produce a first pass at common errors and then spends the saved time in conversation with students who need it has used the tool in service of formation. An institution that uses the same tool to justify larger classes and fewer staff has let efficiency redefine adequacy.

5.3 Productivity in Research

The same tension appears in research. Institutions and funders increasingly measure output, in publications, citations, and grants, and generative tools can raise output cheaply. If output is the measure, AI use that increases it will look like success even where scholarly quality falls. The risk for Nigerian universities, where publication counts heavily towards promotion, is that the pressure to publish combines with easy generation to produce more text and less knowledge. A university



committed to inquiry would ask what a piece of research adds to understanding and would resist counting words.

6. Collaboration and Truth: A Theological Reading of the University's Purpose

6.1 Ecclesiastes 4:9–12: Strength in Company

This article's central claim, that Nigerian universities cannot resolve the challenges of AI through unilateral, ad hoc institutional responses, but require coordinated, collaborative attention across institutions and across the wider higher-education system, finds a striking resonance in Ecclesiastes 4:9–12: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." Read against the argument of this article, this text offers a direct theological rationale for the kind of coordinated, multi-institutional response this article has called for: no single Nigerian university, acting alone, is well positioned to resolve the challenges generative AI poses to assessment, mentorship, and academic integrity, but a "cord of three strands," individual institutions, national regulatory bodies, and a growing community of locally produced research, offers considerably more resilience than any one strand alone.

The setting of the passage sharpens its relevance. It follows Qoheleth's portrait of a solitary worker, with neither son nor brother, whose toil has no end and who never asks for whom he labours. The verses that follow answer that portrait: work done alone is fragile, while work done with others has support when a person falls, warmth in the cold, and defence against attack. The image of the threefold cord suggests that strength lies in the weaving and not merely in the number of strands. For institutions the implication is that coordination must be designed, with shared standards, shared evidence, and shared accountability, and not merely declared.

This same text has already been read fruitfully in relation to African continental cooperation by Kanu, Pilani, and Nwadiolor (2025), whose study of the African Union's peace and integration initiatives in light of Ecclesiastes 4:12 argues that biblical wisdom on the strength of combined effort offers a genuine framework for understanding why collective political and institutional action, however difficult to sustain, remains indispensable to addressing challenges no single actor can resolve alone. Their argument, developed at the continental political level, applies with only minor adaptation to the challenge this article has traced at the institutional level: Nigerian universities, like African Union member states, cannot address the shared challenge of generative AI in isolation from one another (Anthony and Michael, 2026).

6.2 Proverbs 1:7: The Beginning of Knowledge

A second text speaks to this article's account of the university's deeper purpose as truth-seeking rather than mere information transfer. Proverbs 1:7 states: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." This text locates the beginning of genuine knowledge not in the accumulation of information but in a posture of humility before something greater than oneself, a posture strikingly relevant to the epistemic humility this article has argued students and researchers need when evaluating AI-generated content that sounds authoritative but may be fabricated. An institution, or a person, that mistakes fluent output for settled truth has, in the terms of this text, despised the harder discipline that genuine knowledge requires. Pilani's (2025) biblical reflection on the ethics of artificial intelligence and just labour offers a complementary resource here, arguing that the proper posture toward AI tools is one that honours the dignity of the intellectual labour such tools can either support or displace, depending on how they are used, a concern directly continuous with this article's argument that AI should strengthen rather than substitute for the university's formative task (Pilani, 2024). A further resource for thinking about



creativity and meaning-making beyond mere machine output is offered by Kanu, Pilani, and Kanu (2026), whose study of the Arewa symbol as a language of transcendence explores how art and spirituality communicate meaning that exceeds mere formal novelty, a distinction closely related to this article's argument, in section 4, that machine-generated novelty is not the same thing as genuinely human creative judgement.

Proverbs 1 also places the pursuit of wisdom within relationships. The verses that follow the text quoted here urge the hearer to listen to a father's instruction and not to forsake a mother's teaching. Instruction is received from someone. This bears on the argument about mentorship in Section 4: the formation of judgement is not a solitary act of information retrieval but a relationship of teaching and being taught. The word translated "beginning" can also carry the sense of the foremost or governing part, so that reverence is understood to be both the starting point and the organising principle of knowledge. A university need not adopt a particular confession to take the structural point: knowledge that is not oriented by humility and by a truth larger than the knower easily degenerates into cleverness.

6.3 The Two Texts Together

Read together, the two texts describe an institution that is neither self-sufficient nor solitary. Ecclesiastes says that work is stronger when shared; Proverbs says that knowledge begins in humility before a truth one does not command. Both are counsels against a certain kind of self-reliance, whether the self-reliance of the isolated institution or the self-reliance of a mind that trusts fluent output because it has nothing higher to consult. They give a theological form to what the earlier sections argued on philosophical and empirical grounds.

7. Reconsidering the Mission of Nigerian Universities in the AI Age

7.1 Three Options in Practice

Nigerian universities face a genuine choice about how to understand their own mission going forward. One option treats AI primarily as an efficiency tool, adjusting practice only enough to prevent outright fraud; this risks the hollowing-out described above. A second option rejects AI altogether, which is difficult to enforce and risks leaving graduates unprepared for a professional world in which thoughtful AI use is an expected competence. A third option, argued for here, asks continually how any particular use of AI relates to the deeper purposes of higher education, requiring Nigerian universities to be explicit about what they believe those purposes are, and to remain attentive to evidence as it develops.

Each option can be seen in practice. The efficiency option appears as a policy that permits any use short of plagiarism and asks only for a disclosure statement. The prohibition option appears as a blanket ban, in the hope that firm rules will preserve the old order. The third option appears less often because it demands more: a course-by-course, task-by-task judgement about what a given assignment is meant to develop and what tools help or hinder that purpose (Pilani et al., 2026). It also requires humility about evidence, since what appears to help learning today may prove harmful when better data arrive.

7.2 Naming the Capacities

Part of this reconsideration requires Nigerian universities to be explicit, in mission statements and everyday practice, about the specific human capacities they intend to develop in their graduates. A university that has decided, for example, that a core purpose of its undergraduate programme is the development of independent research skills has a clear basis for restricting AI assistance in final-



year research projects, even while permitting more liberal use of AI tools in earlier, foundational coursework.

The example can be extended. A programme that aims to develop skilled writers might permit AI to check grammar but require students to draft the substance in supervised sessions. An engineering programme might allow AI in routine calculation and coding practice while requiring students to justify design decisions orally. A medical or nursing programme might require that students demonstrate clinical reasoning without assistance, because patients cannot be treated by a system that the practitioner is unable to check. Each of these decisions follows from a clear account of what the programme is meant to produce. Without such an account, policy is reduced to rules about tools, which are outdated whenever the tools change.

7.3 Collaboration in Practice

The theological reading in Section 6 suggests that this work should not be done in isolation. Universities can share drafts of policy, assessment designs, and evidence of what works, and deans and directors of academic planning can exchange experience through their existing networks. The National Universities Commission's Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards already combine a nationally specified core with a portion, described as thirty per cent, left to each university (National Universities Commission, 2025), and the Commission has been extending the framework to programmes in artificial intelligence itself. That structure shows how national coordination and institutional discretion can coexist. Whether it can be extended to guidance on AI use in learning and assessment is a question for the Commission, the universities, professional bodies, and the researchers who can supply evidence. The three strands of institution, regulator, and research community offer a model of who should be at the table.

7.4 Review and Evidence

The third option also requires a habit of review. Policies should be written with the expectation that they will be revised, and universities should collect simple evidence on how they are working: whether students understand the rules, whether assessment results have changed, whether staff feel able to apply the policy, and whether some groups of students are disadvantaged. Such evidence need not be elaborate, but without it the commitment to remain attentive to evidence is empty.

7.5 Students as Participants

Students should be at the table too. They use these tools daily, understand their temptations, and will be the first to notice whether a policy is fair. A university that explains its purposes to students, and invites them to help work out what those purposes imply for AI use, treats them as participants in formation and not as suspects.

8. Conclusion

This article has deliberately avoided offering a single, simple answer to the question posed in its title, because no honest answer to a question this large can be simple. It has instead offered a way of approaching the question: taking the historical purposes of higher education seriously, looking honestly at the evidence regarding how generative AI affects thinking and learning, and insisting that Nigerian universities articulate their own purposes explicitly enough to guide decisions about specific technologies. Read theologically, this way forward is collaborative rather than solitary, and grounded in a truth that precedes fluent output rather than reducible to it. The way forward, developed throughout this article, involves Nigerian universities taking their own foundational purposes seriously enough to use them as a continual point of reference, judging each new use of



artificial intelligence not by how much time it saves but by whether it strengthens or weakens the human capacities higher education exists to cultivate.

Three convictions stand behind that answer. The first is that purpose comes before technology: a university cannot judge a tool until it knows what it is trying to do. The second is that evidence should be gathered and weighed honestly, including evidence that is uncomfortable for enthusiasts and for sceptics alike. The third is that the work is shared, across institutions and with the students and communities the university serves. The question in the title will not receive a final answer in this article, or in any single institution's mission statement. It has to be asked again by each generation of students and teachers, and the arrival of generative AI is an occasion to ask it again in Nigeria with more care than before.

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