Critical approaches to the ‘digital transformation’ of higher education

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‘Digital transformation’ promises many benefits, and also presents new risks and challenges.

Higher education sector in Europe needs powerful, critical, research-informed and purpose-driven approaches to use of digital technologies for innovative education.
Industry-led digital transformation
$74B Online Degree Market in 2025, up from $36B in 2019

Pre COVID-19, the online degree market was one of the fastest-growing segments of global higher education. A $74B Online Degree Market in 2025 sounds like a lot, but not compared to Global Higher Education, today a $2.2T global industry. Online Degrees would still represent less than 4% of the Global Higher Education Market at these levels.
The education and technology industries and investors seek to capitalize on market growth via digital transformation of HE.

Industry focus on digital transformation reflects economic assumptions that HE can be ‘valued’ in terms of employability and earnings.

Aims to disrupt, out-compete and replace rather than support and nourish HE, e.g. affordable, quick-ROI, job-relevant credentials and career certificates from corporate training suppliers.
Digital transformation as technological solutionism

Ed-Tech Mania Is Back

Utopia-minded tech gurus promise they’ll solve all of academe’s problems. They won’t.
Higher Education Digital Capability Framework

An open-source capability framework for higher education. 4 dimensions, 16 domains and 70+ capabilities.
Technological solutionism defines atomized problems with isolated, quick-win technical fixes, rather than contextualized and complex issues requiring sectoral dialogue, long-term deliberation and strategy.

Risks producing or entrenching inferior learning experiences, assessment routines and outcomes, e.g. individualized, performance-focused examinations over critical, collective and creative explorations of complex real-world challenges.
Datafication, personalisation and surveillance
Cheating-detection companies made millions during the pandemic. Now students are fighting back.

With remote proctors watching them take tests, some worry that even leaving for the bathroom will brand them as cheats.
Excessive datafication of student performance as a form of surveillance and privacy invasion raises risk of reputational damage, legal action, and breaches of ethics and rights, and need for sector-wide data ethics frameworks and ethical procurement processes.
Alternative manifestos for change

Sector-led, context-specific digital progression as an alternative to techno-utopian images of digital transformation

Mobilise sector experts to restate the social, public and economic values and purposes of HE to European societies

Recruit expert groups in digital education to define the positive contribution of digital and online teaching and learning to the education universities provide students

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