

Speculative Futures for Higher Education

#3



The universal university

Climate change, mobility restrictions and financial pressures have made attendance at campus-based universities unfeasible for most. Distributed, online learners make up the majority of the student body globally. The need for a physical campus has diminished, and campus spaces are almost entirely dedicated to research, administration and local community engagement.

New online teaching models ensure that distributed students stay connected and their educational experiences remain rich and experiential. Significant advancements in virtual and augmented realities allow for highly immersive, distributed educational simulations, and for dynamic community-building as if you were there.

Anyone, anywhere can participate in university as new routes to access are mandated by governments across all continents. In resource-rich nations 90% of people attend university in some form.



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#4



Extreme unbundling

Universities as understood in the 20th century have disappeared. Campuses are cancelled, and universities' estates contract into 'rent by the hour' teaching spaces.

Teaching is sold through a hyper-fragmented market of education services, and higher education is re-framed as 'super-skilling'. Small-scale 'learning shots' are marketed directly to learners, via a network of outsourced provider-academics connected through a handful of global digital platforms.

People learn through life, accumulating various forms of micro-credit in a portfolio validated through reputation management systems and performance analytics. Academics are loosely affiliated to industry-funded research collectives of varying prestige and no physical location. They sell their teaching freelance, creating a new divide between millionaire academic superstars and those who scrape a living from poorly-paid teaching piecemeal.



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#2



AI academy

Machine learning and AI are university infrastructure. AIs working across massive linked databases do all the heavy lifting of academic work from literature reviews to student assessment.

Surveillance is pervasive from the movement of staff around campus to students' attendance, engagement and behaviours. Acceptance of this is high because the gains are significant and very few care about eroded privacy rights. Information is continually sifted, sorted and pushed to students, academics and administrators on a just-in-time basis and with infinite granularity.

Assessment of students is no longer required as AI-enabled analysis of historic, behavioural and neuro data provides an instant categorisation of their capacities. No-one writes essays or reports any more, because AI does it better via instantaneous search and synthesis of massive amounts of data and complex texts.



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#1



Extinction-era universities

Climate disaster is well underway, resulting in global food and water insecurity, uprisings and mass movements of people.

Universities lead the global response. They no longer compete for funding or prestige, but work through global research networks focused on coordinated responses to planetary crises. The internet persists, enabled by green power, but is restricted to research, education, community and government uses only.

Borders are erased to support mass migration. Money no longer exists: collective assets are redistributed to empower sustainable local management. All activity operates according to an 'eco bottom line' in which value accumulates to individuals, organisations and regions on the basis of the work they do to support survival and enable renewability. University teaching is transformed into mass public survival education and is conducted through open education networks and local learning collectives.

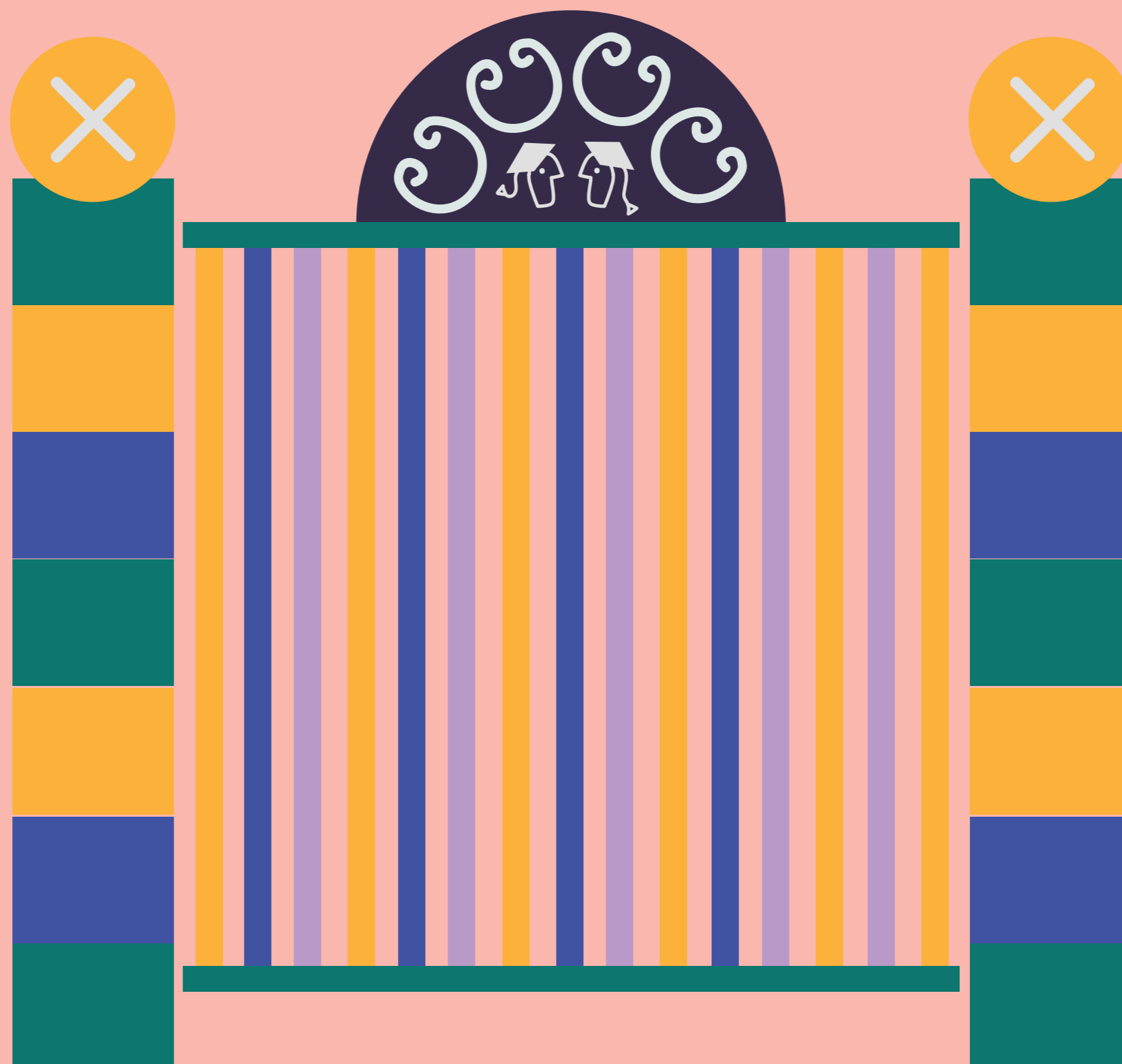


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#6



Return to the ivory tower

Attempts to widen participation in higher education have failed as wealth inequalities grow more acute, state funding of higher education declines and automation decimates semi-skilled work.

The majority of the population has access to basic post-compulsory training in the form of upskilling, microcredentialing and workplace learning. However in-depth academic study is now feasible only for the small proportion of the population likely to move into elite roles, and the function of universities as engines of social mobility has declined.

Universities have returned to the traditional, elite models of the 20th century, with severely capped intakes, one-to-one tuition, an emphasis on data science and liberal arts, highly influential alumni networks and the central role of the (often gated) physical campus as the locus of university life.

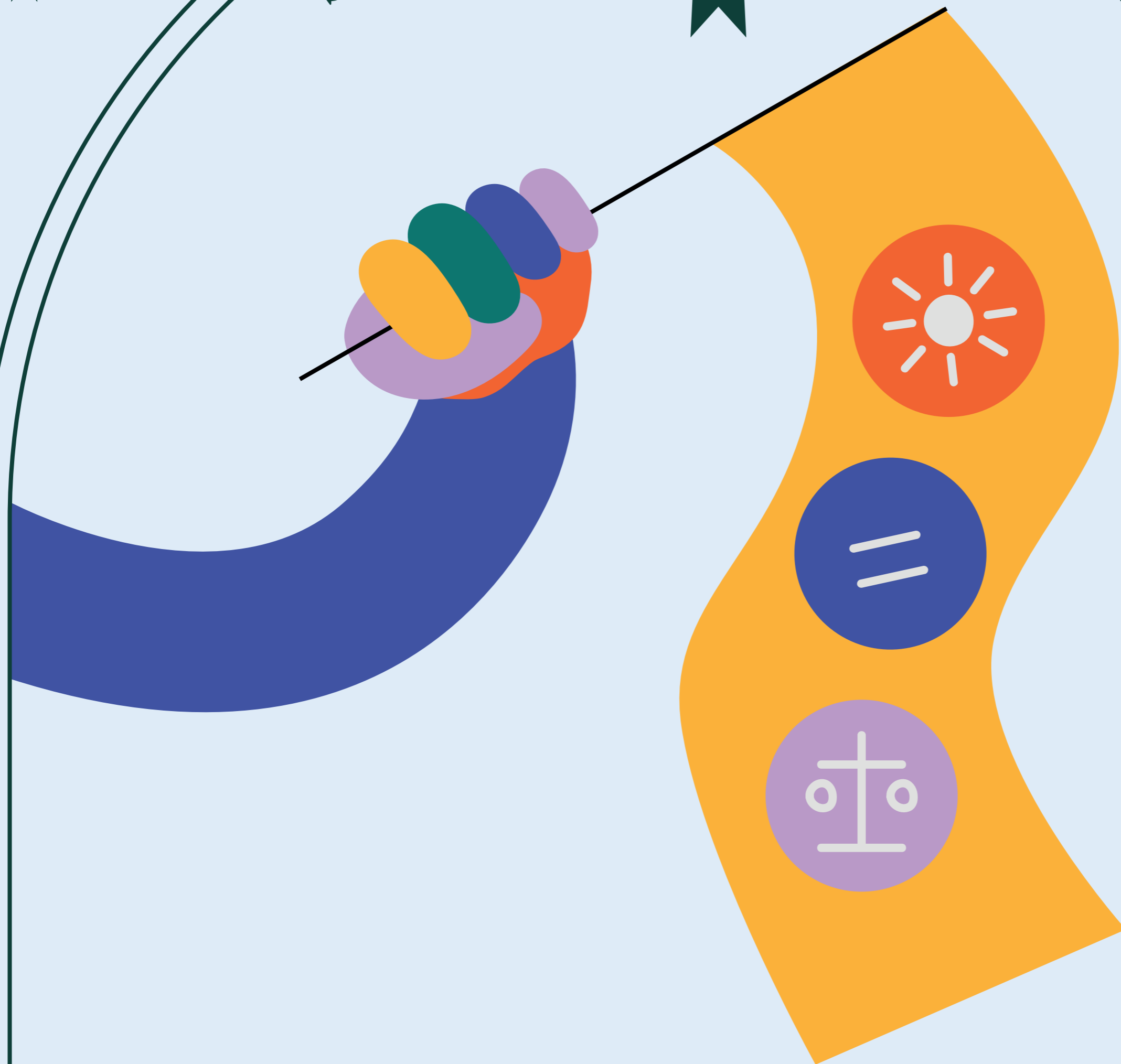


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#5



Justice driven innovation

Unrest arising from acute societal division and unequal access to wealth prompts radical political change, and pressure to develop new economic, social and governance models.

Universities' 'third mission' – to create and share knowledge to address societal challenges – becomes their first mission. In the large research-intensive universities, disciplinary structures give way to radical transdisciplinarity focused on specific social challenge areas: poverty, climate, equality, governance and justice.

Universities collaborate to build their own open learning platforms as there is a mass move away from for-profit, data-extractive big tech infrastructure. This globally-accessible, digital open learning is woven through local, context-specific autonomous ecoversities and there are many strong, activist partnerships between higher education and community-based movements.



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#7



The university of ennui

Automation has taken the place of most manual and professional employment, and paid work has ceased to be the defining activity of adult humans and posthumans.

As a result, there is massively increased demand for higher education that advances creative, critical, philosophical and social skills. University education is extended through life. Ubiquitous technology has liberated humans and posthumans, providing effortless access to information and giving them space and unlimited time to celebrate their social and creative qualities.

However, without work and with the majority of manufacturing industries and services run by AIs, humans are struggling to understand what they are for. In universities the humanities, creative and arts-based subjects reign supreme as individuals seek to understand how to value what is distinct about being human. Education is now focused on supporting learners to navigate personal journeys toward happiness and fulfilment.

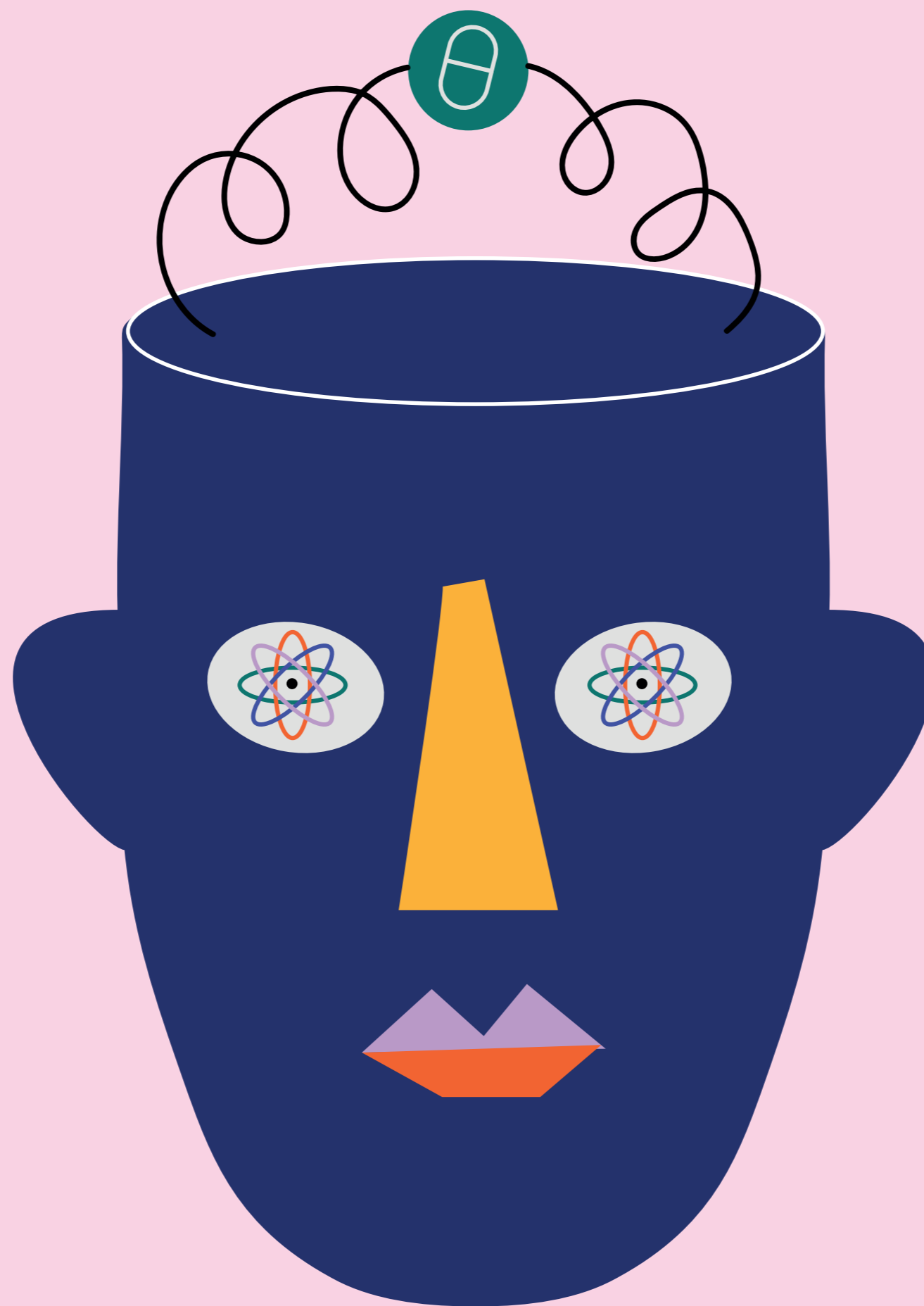


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#8



Enhanced 'enhancement'

Cognitive and other forms of physical 'enhancement' are now normal. 'Big pharma' and the AI and robotics industries have effectively lobbied for changes to law and regulation, amplifying their ability to roll-out enhancement technologies and pharmaceuticals across all sectors from education to health and sport.

Almost all students and staff use smart drugs to enable the extreme focus and endurance needed to complete academic work, as cultures of performance, productivity and metricisation intensify in universities. Cognitive training tools, brain-computer interfaces and electronic neurostimulators are also widely used. 'Brain data' dominates the data industry and is worth billions. Enhanced campuses incorporating routine use of facial, engagement and emotion recognition technologies are mainstream across all education sectors.

Off-grid citizen and freedom movements are gaining in power, however, as the implications of this for freedom, mental privacy and cognitive liberty become clearer.



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