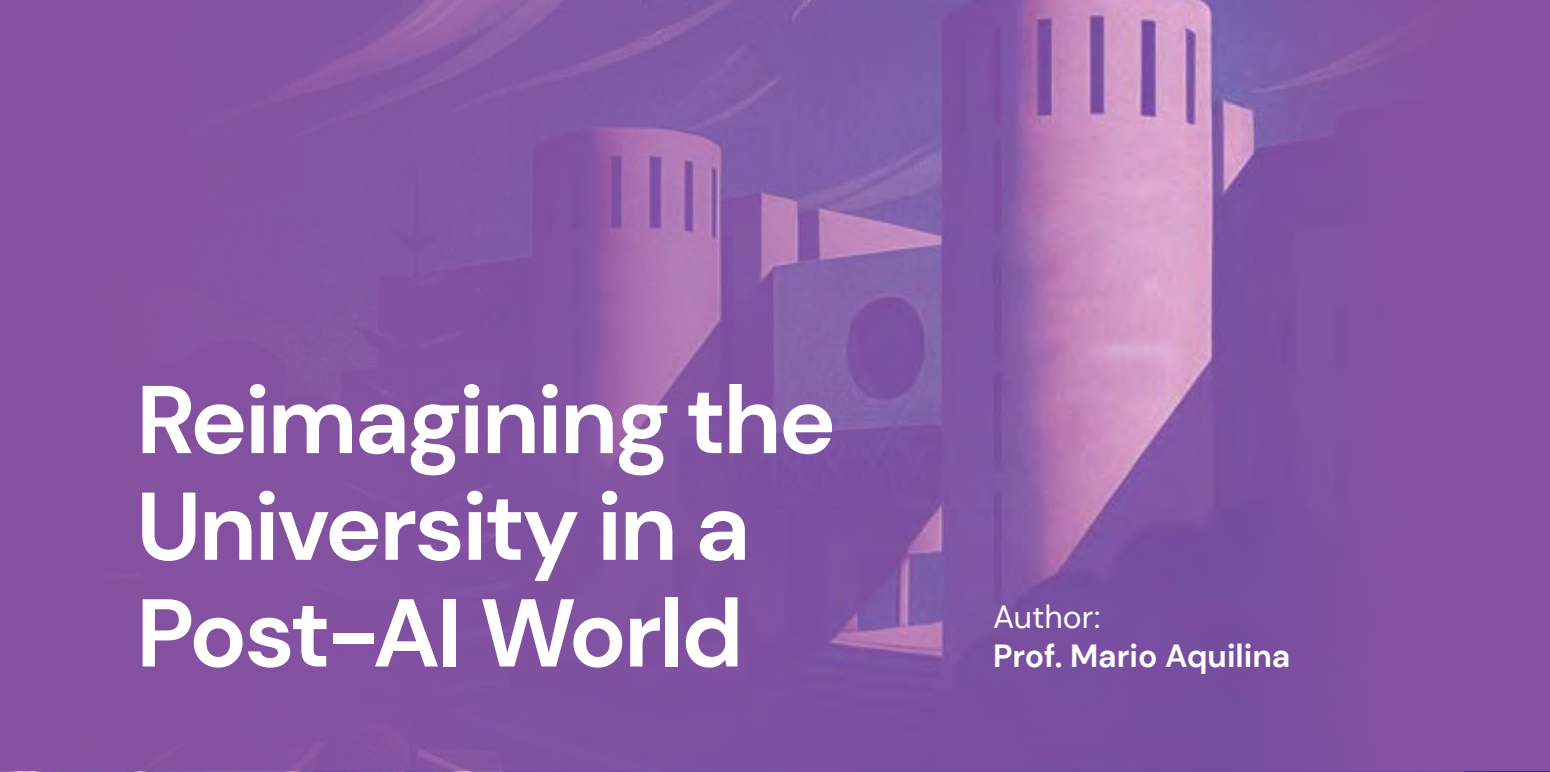




Reimagining the University in a Post-AI World

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During the UMRE 2025, I moderated a discussion panel entitled 'Reimagining the University in the Age of AI: Challenges, Choices, and Change'. The invited panellists were Prof. Matthew Montebello and Prof. Vanessa Camilleri (Faculty of ICT), Prof. Leonard Busuttil (Faculty of Education), Prof. Mireille M. Sant (Faculty of Laws), and Prof. James Corby (Faculty of Arts).

The discussion, along with subsequent questions from the audience, broached the implications of developments in Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) for universities from diverse perspectives, including pedagogy, assessment, legislation, ethics, and research. In this article, I reflect on the panel through more or less provocative propositions that are not intended as conclusive claims but rather as an invitation to further discussion.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GEN AI

Gen AI provokes both fear and fascination. As Corby suggested during the panel, Gen AI evokes

the feeling of *deinos*, or the sense of witnessing something at once 'terrifying and wonderful'. In universities, Gen AI has given rise to legitimate concerns about the erosion of certain cognitive skills and about its implications for specific disciplines, including but not limited to the humanities. At the same time, others see Gen AI as promising exponential growth in efficiency and exciting innovation.

As Sant explained in relation to the European Union Artificial Intelligence Act, and as Camilleri argued in relation to ethical considerations in AI research and implementation, the adoption of Gen AI must strike a balance between allowing for innovation and being wary of, as well as counteracting, the risks that it brings. One risk, I believe, is to focus exclusively on potential at the expense of human consequences. Far from being just a more sophisticated calculator – an analogy often used by those who see Gen AI as merely an advanced tool – Gen AI could potentially transform human history because it competes with, and sometimes surpasses, people in qualities that we used

to consider as exclusively human. AI should be approached with the seriousness demanded of an epochal turning point, rather than dismissed as merely another technological development. And if there is a place where such reflection can or should occur, it is within the university.

A MOMENT OF DECISION

Universities today find themselves in a moment of crisis, in the original Greek sense of *krisis* – a turning point, a moment of judgement and decision. Gen AI is simultaneously a cause (not the only one, of course) and a symptom of this crisis.

On the one hand, as Montebello, Busuttil, and Camilleri explained and illustrated through various practical examples, the availability of Gen AI for students and lecturers means that pedagogy and assessment cannot remain unaffected. We have to adjust and adapt, perhaps radically. On the other hand, as Corby suggested, Gen AI in universities can also be seen as an extension of the logic of neo-liberal rationalisation with its preference for efficiency, speed, and



Discussion panel on AI during UMRE 2025. From left to right: Prof. Mario Aquilna (Moderator), Prof. Matthew Montebello, Prof. Leonard Busuttil, Prof. Mireille M. Sant, Prof. Vanessa Camilleri, and Prof. James Corby
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

quantifiable outcomes. Seen from this perspective, how we respond to AI is not just a pedagogical matter; it is also decisive for the future of the university and what it stands for.

This should not push us into anachronistic and naive luddism, pushing against the use and development of this new technology. In any case, banning AI from the lecture room is neither possible nor desirable. On the contrary, it is essential for university members to develop AI literacy, not only to use Gen AI if and when needed, but also to truly understand the implications of doing so, or of choosing not to.

TOWARDS A MORE HOLISTIC UNIVERSITY

If we were to think of the irruptive and disruptive potential of Gen AI for universities from a more positive perspective, we might reimagine the university less in terms of the transactions it facilitates and more in terms of the human experiences it provides. As several panellists argued in relation to assessment, one form of adaptation might be

to prioritise process over product in assessment and learning.

What if we used this transformative moment to rediscover or consolidate the values of presence, discussion, and the holistic growth of individuals? What if we moved away from the conception of the university as simply a space for knowledge and skill delivery in a provider-to-customer relation? This is not to say that the university should in any way abdicate from its educational mission (which, of course, includes the formation and dissemination of knowledge and the development of skills) or that it should set aside concerns about student employability. But, it is also possible, and arguably necessary, to think of tertiary education in more rounded ways. Doing so would be radical and courageous, and possibly also beneficial for the future of universities and the societies they serve.

THE WAY FORWARD

A final thought that arises from the panel and the animated discussion that followed is that, irrespective of where and how members of the university position themselves in

relation to AI, it is important for there to be sustained debate. In what is already a world irreversibly marked by AI, universities today do not have a choice about introducing or excluding Gen AI. There is no way back, but it would be a mistake to fail to understand just how epoch-shifting AI technology truly is.

The consolidation of interdisciplinary spaces for serious discussion about AI is thus of fundamental importance. These may include training workshops (some already underway), research initiatives across faculties, and genuinely consultative, university-wide discussions on policy. The University of Malta is well placed not only to provide such spaces for its members but also to become an important voice in local and international conversations through more sustained public interventions on AI by its members.

Perhaps the real challenge is not to limit ourselves to thinking of Gen AI as something to which the university must react but to make the university a place that can guide society on how to live with Gen AI. **T**