



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE CHANGING IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY: KNOWLEDGE, EXPERTISE, AND INSTITUTIONAL RENEWAL IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The idea of the university has never stayed fixed; it has been reshaped repeatedly by new subjects, new technologies, and new social demands. This article situates the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) within this longer history of institutional transformation and examines how it unsettles a specific set of assumptions: that academic expertise is grounded in individual mastery achieved through sustained personal engagement with material, and that competent-sounding written output reliably signals underlying understanding. Drawing on Nigerian and international scholarship on AI adoption, hallucination, and academic integrity, the article argues that Nigerian universities are not simply adopting a new tool but are being asked to reconsider basic assumptions about knowledge, expertise, and institutional identity. This reconsideration is read theologically through Proverbs 2:6, on the divine source of wisdom and understanding, and 1 Corinthians 8:1, on the difference between knowledge that puffs up and love that builds up, and is further illuminated through recent African scholarship on symbol, hermeneutics, and institutional renewal. The article concludes that Nigerian universities require coordinated national attention alongside institutional flexibility, informed by locally produced research rather than frameworks borrowed uncritically from elsewhere.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, university mission, knowledge and expertise, institutional renewal, Nigerian higher education, academic integrity

1. Introduction

The word university comes from an old idea: a community, gathered around a shared and general pursuit of knowledge, open in principle to every branch of learning. That idea has never stayed fixed. It has been reshaped many times by new subjects, new technologies, and new social demands, from the introduction of the printing press to the rise of the modern research university, and from the expansion of mass higher education to the spread of digital learning. Artificial intelligence, and especially generative artificial intelligence, is the newest force acting on this old idea, and it is acting on it quickly. This article considers artificial intelligence as a new and significant stage in the



university's ongoing transformation, and asks what this means for Nigerian universities in particular. The argument developed here is that Nigerian universities are not simply adopting a new tool; they are being asked, whether they fully realise it or not, to reconsider some of their basic assumptions about knowledge, expertise, and how each of these is produced and recognised within academic life. Three questions organise the discussion. What has the university been for, and how has its mission changed as new technologies and new social demands have arrived? What exactly does generative AI change, and how does that differ from what earlier technologies changed? And what follows for Nigerian universities, whose circumstances differ in important respects from those of the institutions that dominate the literature? The article does not claim that these questions have settled answers. It argues that they need to be asked deliberately, and that the answers will shape not only policy on AI but the way universities understand what they certify when they award a degree.

The method is interpretive. The article reads the history of the university, recent empirical and policy research, and two biblical texts together, and it draws on recent African scholarship on symbol and hermeneutics to think about institutional renewal. Section 2 reviews the history and mission of the university, and Section 3 places AI among earlier technological transformations. Section 4 considers its arrival in Nigerian universities, and Section 5 examines what it does to assumptions about knowledge and expertise. Section 6 offers a theological reading, Section 7 considers the Nigerian context, Section 8 turns to structural renewal, and Section 9 concludes.

2. The Historical Development and Mission of the University

2.1 Origins and Early Models

Universities across the world share a broadly similar origin story. They began as gatherings of scholars and students, organised around the transmission and extension of established bodies of knowledge, and over the following centuries this basic model absorbed new functions — experimental science, professional training, and, in the twentieth century, an expanded mission tied to national development. Nigerian universities have generally embraced this same layered mission, combining a commitment to knowledge production and academic freedom with strong expectations around national development and practical relevance.

The medieval universities of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford were guilds of masters and students that organised the teaching of theology, law, medicine, and the arts. Their authority rested on the licence to teach, a certification of competence that the community itself granted, and their method combined the reading of authoritative texts with disputation, in which claims were tested by argument. Two features of this origin remain important. Learning was conducted in a community and not alone, and the community's judgement about who had learned was the basis of the degree.

2.2 Competing Ideas of the University

Later centuries produced competing accounts of what the university is for. John Henry Newman, in his lectures on the idea of a university, defended liberal education as the cultivation of a disciplined and comprehensive intellect, valued for its own sake and not only for its usefulness (Newman, 1996). The reforms associated with Humboldt in nineteenth-century Berlin joined teaching to research and made the pursuit of new knowledge central to the university's identity. In the twentieth century Clark



Kerr described the “multiversity”, a sprawling institution serving many constituencies and functions at once (Kerr, 1963). Each of these ideas persists in current debates, often in tension. A university that stresses research may neglect teaching, and one that stresses employability may neglect inquiry for its own sake.

2.3 The Nigerian Layering

University College, Ibadan, opened in 1948 as a college of the University of London and became the independent University of Ibadan in 1962. The Ashby Commission, reporting in 1960, framed higher education as an investment in the high-level manpower that a self-governing nation would need (Federal Ministry of Education, 1960), and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, founded in 1960, was followed in 1962 by Ahmadu Bello University, the University of Ife, and the University of Lagos. The National Universities Commission was later given responsibility for setting minimum standards and accrediting programmes, and the licensing of private universities from 1999 added a further tier. Each stage added expectations and none removed the earlier ones. A Nigerian university today is asked to be a place of inquiry, a training ground for professionals, an engine of development, and increasingly a competitor for students and funds (Pilani et al., 2026).

The establishment of Nigeria’s earliest universities in the mid-twentieth century was closely tied to the broader project of national independence and development. Artificial intelligence enters this already crowded set of expectations as both an opportunity, since it promises to support exactly the kind of technological and scientific advancement Nigerian higher education has long been asked to deliver, and a complication, since it raises difficult questions about whether the particular skills AI can now perform are the same skills Nigerian graduates most need to develop for themselves.

3. Major Technological Transformations in Higher Education

3.1 Distribution, Access, and Production

It is useful to place artificial intelligence within the broader history of technological change in higher education. The printing press changed how knowledge was distributed; the internet changed how knowledge was accessed. Generative artificial intelligence changes something more fundamental: how the outward products of knowledge production, written analysis, summaries, arguments, can be generated without the traditional intermediary of sustained individual human effort. Nigerian universities experienced each earlier transformation with some delay relative to wealthier parts of the world, a pattern shaped by infrastructure, funding, and colonial and postcolonial economic conditions (Adeniyi et al., 2024). This history of delayed but persistent technological adoption is important context for understanding how Nigerian universities are now approaching artificial intelligence.

The distinction is worth developing. The press made texts cheap and standardised, and so widened the audience for learning and eventually changed the roles of the lecturer and the library. The internet made a vast range of material searchable from a distance, and it changed what students needed to be taught: less how to find a book, more how to judge a source. In both cases the work of producing an argument, a summary, or an analysis remained with the person who did it. Even the calculator, the spellchecker, and the search engine, which automated narrow tasks, left the act of composing a piece of reasoning with the writer.



Generative AI differs because it produces the composed result. Given a prompt, it returns an essay, a summary, or a piece of code that has the form of finished work. The student's role can shrink to that of requesting and selecting, and the visible product no longer reliably shows what took place in the person who submitted it. The change is therefore not only one of speed. It affects the evidential link between what a student hands in and what that student has understood, on which much of university assessment has depended.

The pattern of delayed adoption noted by Adeniyi et al. (2024) has a particular significance here. Earlier transformations reached Nigerian universities after institutions elsewhere had already discovered many of their pitfalls. Generative AI appears to have reached Nigerian students at nearly the same time as students elsewhere, which leaves Nigerian universities without a long lead time in which to learn from others' mistakes.

4. Artificial Intelligence as a New Stage in the Transformation of University Life

4.1 The Speed of Policy and Practice

Global research on institutional responses shows that universities around the world have had to develop policies on generative AI use at considerable speed, with many choosing structured, permissive approaches rather than outright bans (Jin et al., 2025), a pattern corroborated by comparative research on university policy and guidance documents (Wang et al., 2024). Nigerian universities have been part of this global pattern, adopting generative AI tools rapidly at the level of individual student and staff practice, often well ahead of any formal institutional policy (Peters & Olojede, 2025).

The speed of these developments has a consequence that is easy to overlook. Policy is normally made through committees, consultations, and senate approvals, which take months, while student practice changed in weeks. Universities that waited for a complete national framework found that informal norms had formed in its absence, and norms formed informally tend to be inconsistent from lecturer to lecturer and course to course. Nigeria's National Artificial Intelligence Strategy of September 2025 provides a national reference point (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2025), but, as a review of the country's governance landscape observes, no standalone AI law has been enacted (Kanu et al., 2025; Buza & Taha, 2026; Okonkwo et al., 2025).

The preference for structured, permissive policies over bans has a rationale beyond enforceability. A ban that cannot be enforced penalises the honest and rewards the evasive, and it prevents open discussion of how the tools should be used well. Structured policies bring use into view, allow lecturers to set different rules for different tasks, and give students a vocabulary for asking what is permitted. Their weakness is that they depend on shared understanding, which brings the argument back to the question of what universities take legitimate academic work to be.

4.2 Evidence of Benefit

There is also encouraging evidence that generative AI, deployed carefully, can produce genuine educational benefits within Nigerian contexts specifically. A large randomised evaluation of an AI-powered virtual tutoring programme in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria, found substantial improvements in English language learning outcomes among students who used the programme



under structured teacher supervision (De Simone et al., 2025). Broader international research documents growing use of these tools for literature searching, drafting, and summarisation as part of a wider transformation in teaching innovation, inclusion, and assessment practice (Sousa & Cardoso, 2025).

This evidence should be handled precisely. The Edo State programme was structured, teacher-supervised, and confined to a defined educational task in secondary schools. Its results give reason to think that carefully designed AI-supported learning can help in Nigerian conditions, but they do not show that unstructured use of general-purpose tools by university students produces similar gains. The distinction between AI integrated into a designed programme of learning and AI consulted at will is central to the argument that follows, since the first can be evaluated and improved while the second happens largely out of view.

4.3 Staff Practice

Lecturers are also part of this picture. They use generative tools to draft materials, and some use them to help mark or comment on student work. If students may not delegate their thinking to a machine, it is fair to ask what standards apply to staff who delegate part of their feedback, and how students should be told. A consistent institutional position on AI must apply to those who teach as well as to those who learn.

5. Changing Assumptions about Knowledge and Expertise

5.1 Individual Mastery and Its Assumptions

Perhaps the deepest change generative AI introduces concerns how knowledge and expertise are understood within the university. Traditionally, academic expertise has been closely tied to individual mastery: a scholar was considered an expert because they had personally read, absorbed, and critically engaged with a substantial body of material over an extended period of study. Generative AI complicates this picture because it can produce responses that sound authoritative on almost any subject, without the system itself possessing anything resembling genuine understanding, and without any guarantee that its output is accurate.

This picture of expertise is both accurate and incomplete. It is accurate in that a scholar's authority has ordinarily rested on years of reading, argument, and correction, and on a shared expectation that the person named on a paper has done the thinking it reports. It is incomplete because scholarship has never been solitary (Kanu et al., 2026). Experts rely on libraries, laboratories, statistical software, translators, research assistants, and colleagues who read their drafts. The question is therefore not whether experts use aids, since they always have, but what kind of relationship to the aid keeps expertise intact. The test, in each case, is whether the scholar can explain, defend, and correct the result, and can tell when it is wrong.

5.2 Verification and Fluent Output

This complication raises the practical problem of verification — generative AI systems can produce fabricated references and confidently stated but incorrect claims, a limitation often called hallucination, and the more fundamental conceptual problem of what expertise actually means once



fluent, well-organised responses can be generated without any underlying process of individual learning. Research on student perceptions of AI and academic honesty has found considerable inconsistency in how students distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of AI assistance (Lund et al., 2025), suggesting that Nigerian universities cannot rely on informal, shared understanding of what counts as legitimate academic work in an AI-saturated environment. Explicit policy, consistently communicated and enforced, has become considerably more necessary than in earlier periods (Pilani, 2024).

Two further points bear on verification. First, hallucination is not merely an occasional malfunction; it follows in part from how such systems work. They generate statistically plausible text, and plausibility is not the same as truth (Bender et al., 2021; Ji et al., 2023). Second, verifying claims is itself a form of expertise. A student who already knows a field can spot a fabricated reference or a subtly wrong argument, while a novice cannot. Those most likely to depend on AI output are therefore the least able to check it, which makes the early years of a degree the place where the risks to formation are greatest.

5.3 Signals and Their Erosion

Universities have long relied on written work as a signal of understanding. A competent essay was hard to produce without some comprehension, so a good essay was reasonable evidence of it. When the signal can be generated without the underlying process, it stops carrying information, and every institution that depends on it, from examination boards to employers reading transcripts, is affected. A signal that is cheap to fake invites two responses: distrust of all written work, which harms honest students, or a search for new signals, which requires rethinking what is assessed and how.

5.4 Expertise as Answerability

If fluent output can no longer certify understanding, the university must place greater weight on the capacities that output only imperfectly reveals: the ability to frame a question, to weigh competing sources, to notice what an argument leaves out, to change one's mind for good reasons, and to answer for one's claims in conversation. These are not new goals. They are the older goals of liberal education, of which the written essay was partly a proxy. AI does not abolish them; it removes the proxy and forces the university to attend to them directly.

One way to state the shift is that expertise has always included answerability. An expert is someone who can be asked why, and who can respond. This gives a workable criterion for AI use that does not depend on detecting the tool: a student or scholar who can account for every claim in a piece of work, explain how it was reached, and defend it under questioning has, whatever the tools involved, exercised the capacity the university exists to develop.

6. Knowledge, Wisdom, and Institutional Renewal: A Theological Reading

6.1 Wisdom and Understanding: Proverbs 2:6

The distinction this article has drawn between fluent output and genuine understanding is, at root, a distinction between information and wisdom, a distinction with deep roots in the biblical wisdom tradition. Proverbs 2:6 states: "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and



understanding.” This text distinguishes wisdom and understanding from the mere possession or transmission of information; both are gifts received through a process, not products manufactured on demand. Applied to the university, this suggests that an institution’s proper concern is not simply whether a text sounds knowledgeable, but whether genuine understanding, the capacity to reason, judge, and discern, has actually been cultivated in the person producing it. A generative AI system can imitate the fruits of understanding without possessing understanding itself, which is precisely the gap this article has argued Nigerian universities must learn to assess.

The context of the verse strengthens the point. The opening of Proverbs 2 speaks of receiving instruction, of attending closely, and of seeking wisdom as one seeks silver and hidden treasure. Wisdom is thus both sought through sustained effort and received as a gift, and the text does not set the two against each other. The implication for the university is that effort and gift belong together: students must do the searching, and teachers and communities must supply the conditions in which understanding can be given and received. A tool that removes the searching risks removing the occasion for understanding to arrive.

6.2 Knowledge and Love: 1 Corinthians 8:1

A second text sharpens this point further. 1 Corinthians 8:1 observes that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Read alongside the concerns raised above about competent-sounding but sometimes fabricated AI output, this text warns against mistaking the appearance of knowledge — confident, fluent, well-organised — for something of genuine value to the community. An institution that rewards the appearance of knowledge over the harder, slower work of actually building understanding in its members risks precisely the inflation this text names.

Paul’s remark arises from a dispute in Corinth about food offered to idols, in which some believers claimed superior knowledge and used it to disregard the consciences of others. The point is not that knowledge is bad but that knowledge detached from care for others becomes a source of vanity and harm. For a university the warning has two edges. It concerns the individual who displays fluent competence without understanding, and it concerns the institution that rewards display over substance. It also raises the question of whom knowledge is for: an education that produces graduates who can generate impressive text but cannot serve their communities has missed its purpose.

6.3 New Wine, New Wineskins

This theological reading of institutional renewal connects to a distinct strand of recent African scholarship on symbol and hermeneutics. Kanu and Pilani (2024b), in their semiotic hermeneutic of the saying “new wine, new wineskins,” argue that authentic development in African institutional life requires new conceptual and structural containers appropriate to genuinely new realities, rather than forcing new phenomena into inherited frameworks that were never designed to hold them. Applied here, their argument suggests that Nigerian universities cannot simply pour the reality of generative AI into old assumptions about individual authorship and expertise; the university’s structures of assessment, mentorship, and credentialing may themselves need to be renewed as “new wineskins” capable of holding this new wine responsibly. A related study by Kanu and Pilani (2024a) on the Arewa symbol as a confluence of philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions offers a further



resource for this argument, illustrating how African intellectual traditions have long used symbol and hermeneutic reading to hold multiple, sometimes competing, sources of meaning together — a capacity for interpretive discernment that this article suggests is precisely what is needed as Nigerian universities work out which AI-generated outputs to trust and which to treat with suspicion. Pilani's (2025) reflection on the ethics of artificial intelligence from a biblical perspective on just labour further reinforces this reading, situating the proper use of AI tools within a wider ethical framework concerned with the dignity of the intellectual labour such tools risk displacing.

The saying that Kanu and Pilani examine has its source in the Gospel accounts, where new wine is said to burst old wineskins because the skins cannot stretch as the wine ferments. The image is not a rejection of the old; it is a claim about fit between a living substance and its container. Applied to the university, it suggests that the question to ask is not whether inherited structures such as the essay, the examination, and the dissertation are good, since many are, but whether each still does the work it was designed to do in the presence of generative AI. Where it does not, renewal, and not defensive repair, is called for. Taken together, the three readings point in one direction. Proverbs locates understanding in a process of seeking and receiving, 1 Corinthians places knowledge within a relationship of care, and the saying about wineskins asks that structures be renewed to fit new realities. None of these prescribes a policy. Each offers a criterion by which policies might be judged: whether they cultivate understanding, whether they build up those who learn and those they will serve, and whether the structures they create are adequate to the changed circumstances.

7. The Nigerian University and Technological Change

7.1 Unequal Conditions

Nigerian universities occupy a particular position within this global story of technological transformation, shaped by conditions not shared equally across all higher education systems. Continental research on the artificial intelligence divide in Africa documents substantial disparities in infrastructure, connectivity, and technical capacity (Malatji, 2026), disparities the African Union's continental strategy explicitly identifies as priorities for investment (African Union, 2024; Anthony and Michael, 2026). A well-funded private university with reliable internet access may integrate these technologies into teaching and research relatively smoothly, while a less-resourced public university may struggle simply to establish basic, consistent access. For staff and students in the less-resourced institutions the constraints are concrete: interrupted electricity, expensive data, few licensed tools, and libraries with limited access to paid databases. These constraints do not make the AI question irrelevant, since the tools are reachable through personal phones, but they shape which uses are possible and who benefits. A student with a reliable connection and a paid subscription has a very different tool from one relying on a free tier on an intermittent network.

7.2 Avoiding Two Errors

Recognising this unevenness helps avoid two opposite errors: assuming Nigerian universities are simply behind and need only to catch up, which ignores real internal diversity, and assuming infrastructural challenges make serious engagement with artificial intelligence premature, which ignores the fact that students and staff are already using these tools regardless of institutional silence. National coordination, alongside considerable flexibility at the institutional level, and a growing body



of locally produced research, together offer a more realistic path forward than either extreme. Both errors are tempting because each simplifies. The first allows Nigerian universities to be treated as a single laggard, and the second allows delay to be presented as prudence. In practice a federal university with a very large enrolment, a state university facing funding pressure, and a private university with smaller classes will face different problems and will need different first steps.

7.3 National Coordination and Institutional Flexibility

The National Universities Commission's handling of curricula offers a precedent for how coordination and flexibility might be combined. In its Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards, a national core is specified for each programme and a share, described as thirty per cent, is left to universities to shape according to their own circumstances (National Universities Commission, 2025). The Commission has also been bringing artificial intelligence itself into its programme standards. These developments concern the teaching of AI as a subject, and they do not settle how AI use should be governed in learning and assessment. But they show that a shared framework with room for local judgement is an established pattern in Nigerian higher education, and one that could be extended to questions of academic integrity, disclosure, and assessment design.

7.4 Local Knowledge and Local Research

The third element noted above, locally produced research, deserves emphasis because so much of the current literature originates elsewhere. Large language models are trained largely on online text that reflects the viewpoints of those most heavily represented on the internet (Bender et al., 2021), and they may be less reliable on Nigerian law, history, and languages, or on the agricultural, medical, and social conditions that Nigerian graduates will work with. Frameworks borrowed uncritically from other systems may embed assumptions about class size, connectivity, and assessment practice that do not hold here. Local studies of how students and lecturers actually use these tools, of what they gain and lose, and of which assessment designs work in large classes would supply evidence on which sound policy could be built. Until such research exists, borrowed frameworks should be treated as hypotheses to be tested locally and not as settled answers.

8. Renewing Structures: Assessment, Mentorship, and Credentialing

If new wineskins are needed, the places to look are the three structures that the discussion above has repeatedly touched: assessment, mentorship, and credentialing.

8.1 Assessment

Assessment should be designed so that it can still tell teachers something. This does not require abandoning written work. It means combining written work with forms of evidence that show the process behind it: staged drafts, annotated readings, short oral explanations of submitted work, in-class writing, and tasks tied to local data, fieldwork, or class discussion. Graduated frameworks, which state how much AI assistance is acceptable for a given task, help students to know where the boundaries lie (Perkins et al., 2024). Each of these measures costs staff time, and any serious reform must reckon with large classes.



8.2 Mentorship

Supervision of a dissertation is an apprenticeship in which a scholar watches a junior colleague think, corrects the reasoning as well as the prose, and models intellectual habits. Where a supervisor sees only a polished chapter, that apprenticeship is empty. Supervisors therefore need regular contact points at which students explain their choices, and institutions need to make time for them, which large supervision loads often prevent. AI can play a supporting role, for instance in feedback on grammar or structure, but it should not replace the conversation in which a student learns to defend a claim to someone who knows the field.

8.3 Credentialing

A degree certifies that its holder has met defined standards, and its value depends on the public's trust in that certification. That trust rests on the university's ability to say what its graduates can do without assistance and what they can do with it. Institutions might in future state on transcripts or in diploma supplements the competences that have been directly verified, including the ability to use AI tools critically. Whatever form this takes, credentialing should follow from a clear account of what the programme is meant to develop.

9. Conclusion

Three broad conclusions emerge. First, the idea of the university has always been a moving target, shaped by successive waves of technological and social change, and artificial intelligence should be understood within this longer history rather than as an unprecedented rupture. Second, generative AI genuinely does something different from earlier educational technologies by intervening directly in the production of knowledge rather than only its distribution or access, which is why questions about expertise, verification, and academic trust have become considerably more urgent. Third, Nigerian universities, because of their internal diversity and their position within a wider African context marked by real infrastructural constraints, cannot address these questions through a single uniform policy. Read theologically, the task is one of institutional renewal: cultivating wisdom rather than merely accumulating information, and building new structures adequate to a genuinely new reality rather than forcing that reality into containers built for another age.

Three commitments follow. Universities should name explicitly the capacities they intend to develop; they should design assessment, mentorship, and credentialing around those capacities; and they should coordinate nationally while leaving room for local judgement, supported by research produced in Nigerian conditions.

The article has limits. It is interpretive, it draws on evidence that comes largely from outside Nigerian universities, and the technology it discusses is changing fast. What it offers is a way of framing the choice. Nigerian universities are not being asked only to adopt or reject a tool but to state what they take knowledge and expertise to be, and to build structures that can carry that understanding through a period of rapid change. The task is demanding, but it is also an opportunity to recover for the present what the university has always claimed to be about: the patient formation of persons who understand, and who can be trusted with what they know.



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