

Does University Still Matter in the Age of AI?

As artificial intelligence accelerates at unprecedented speed, a question echoes across classrooms, living rooms, parents' groups, homeschool communities, and workplaces: Does university still matter?

It is a question born not from curiosity, but from anxiety. Behind it lies a deeper fear shared by students and adults alike: Will AI replace me? Will what I study still matter in the future? Should young people skip university and enter the workforce earlier?

To understand the real answer, we need to look beyond theory and into the life of a real student — Paris, who entered Hong Kong Polytechnic University at just 15 years old, majoring in Physics and Artificial Intelligence. Her journey reveals what university truly provides, and why its value remains irreplaceable even in an AI-driven world.

The Hidden Fear Behind “Does University Still Matter?”

AI now writes code, analyzes data, drafts essays, and automates tasks once considered uniquely human. It is natural for families to wonder: If AI can do so much, what is the point of a degree? Should students start working earlier to “stay ahead”?

But these questions overlook a fundamental truth: AI can process information, but it cannot grow a human being. University is not merely a place to learn facts. It is a place to become someone capable of thinking, collaborating, leading, and contributing. Paris's story illustrates this transformation vividly.

What University Gives Us That AI Never Will — Through Paris's Experience

1. Independence: Learning to Stand, Fall, and Rise Again

On Paris's second day at university, I told her: “It is time for Mum to let go. From today onward, real life will be your teacher. You will learn from your own decisions — in your academics and in your life.” I reminded her of what she learned during homeschooling: Life, like the weather, changes constantly. There will be sunny days, rainy days, beautiful days, and stormy days. I told her: Enjoy the sunny and beautiful days. But also learn how to keep dancing in the rain and the storm. If you fall, remember what you learned at home — find your way to stand up again. Because it is in the falling and rising that a young person develops resilience, self-trust, and true independence. University gave Paris the space to practice this — not under a parent's protection, but in the real world, where choices have consequences and growth comes from navigating uncertainty. AI cannot teach a young person how to fall with grace, rise with strength, or walk forward with confidence. Only life can. And university is where that life begins.

2. Critical Thinking: The Ability to Ask Better Questions

AI can generate answers instantly, but it cannot teach a young mind how to question assumptions or evaluate truth. In her physics and AI courses, Paris learned to ask: Why does this

model behave this way? What assumptions are hidden in this formula? Is this dataset biased? Does this conclusion actually make sense? These are the foundations of scientific reasoning — and they cannot be outsourced to machines.

3. Collaboration: Learning to Work With Real People

University is full of team projects, each one a small simulation of the real world. Paris worked with highly motivated teammates, creative but chronically late teammates, quiet but reliable teammates, and teammates who disappeared entirely. Through these experiences, she learned communication, conflict resolution, leadership, negotiation, and emotional intelligence. AI cannot teach these human skills. Only people can.

4. Interdisciplinary Thinking: Connecting What AI Cannot

Paris's education blended physics, AI, psychology, business, and design. She learned to use physics to understand systems, use AI to solve problems, use psychology to understand people, use business thinking to understand value, and use design thinking to understand users. AI excels in narrow domains. Humans excel in connecting them.

5. Human Networks: Mentors, Peers, and Opportunities

At Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Paris met professors who challenged her, inspired her, and opened doors for her. AI can draft an email, but it cannot introduce you to a mentor who changes your life.

6. Identity and Purpose: Discovering Who You Are

University gave Paris space to explore her values, her interests, her strengths, and the kind of person she wants to become. AI can mimic your voice, but it cannot help you find it.

7. Professional Training: Especially in Physics and AI

Fields like physics and artificial intelligence require deep conceptual understanding, hands-on experimentation, mathematical reasoning, ethical judgment, and the ability to interpret models responsibly. AI can assist with calculations, but it cannot replace the human judgment required to build, evaluate, and deploy technology safely. Paris's training in these areas is something no machine can replicate.

What If Paris Had Entered the Workforce at 15 Instead of University?

Some people asked: "If Paris had skipped university and gone straight to work, wouldn't she be earning money already?" Perhaps. But earning money early is not the same as building a foundation for a lifetime. University gave her maturity, depth, perspective, intellectual discipline, emotional resilience, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to society. These are not things one "skips" without consequence.

The Four Years Before University: A Different Kind of Preparation

Before entering university, Paris spent four transformative years in a unique learning journey built on Worldschooled, Personalized Learning, and Life Education. These experiences shaped her worldview — but university refined her abilities and grounded her potential.

What Hong Kong Polytechnic University Gave Her That AI Never Could

Across four years, the university environment strengthened her hands-on laboratory skills, scientific reasoning, ethical judgment in AI, interdisciplinary integration, teamwork and communication, and decision-making under pressure. These are the competencies that define a capable human being — not just a productive worker.

So, Does University Still Matter?

In the age of AI, university is not less relevant — it is more relevant. Because university is not just about knowledge. It is about becoming someone who can think, collaborate, innovate, and lead. Paris entered university as a 15-year-old girl. She is graduating as a thoughtful, analytical, resilient young woman ready to contribute to the world. And that transformation — that human growth — is something AI will never be able to replace.

Written By Dr Lai Mei Kei Vivien

Open-Ended Questions

1. Why does the author say the question comes from anxiety rather than curiosity?
2. How does Paris’s story help answer the question about the value of university?
3. What does the author mean by “AI can process information, but it cannot grow a human being”?
4. Describe how Paris developed independence during her university experience.
5. Why is critical thinking important in fields like physics and AI?
6. What human skills did Paris learn through collaboration?
7. How does interdisciplinary learning help students understand the world better?
8. What long-term benefits did Paris gain from university?
9. How did Paris’s four years before university prepare her?
10. Summarize the author’s final conclusion about university in the age of AI.

Close-Ended Questions

True/False

1. Paris entered university at age 15.
2. AI can teach students how to collaborate.

3. University helped Paris develop emotional resilience.
4. The author believes earning money early is more important than long-term growth.
5. University helped Paris build networks with mentors.

Fill in the Blank

6. AI can process information, but it cannot _____ a human being.
7. Paris majored in Physics and _____ Intelligence.
8. Asking better questions is the foundation of _____ reasoning.
9. Before university, Paris experienced Worldschoooling, Personalized Learning, and _____ Education.
10. University is not less relevant, but _____ relevant.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. What is the main reason families question whether university still matters?
 - A. Universities are becoming less popular
 - B. AI is advancing rapidly and taking over human tasks
 - C. Students prefer online learning
 - D. University degrees are no longer recognized
2. According to the passage, what is something AI cannot do?
 - A. Write code
 - B. Process information
 - C. Grow a human being
 - D. Analyze data
3. What did Paris learn from her early university experience?
 - A. How to avoid difficult subjects
 - B. How to rely on AI for decision-making
 - C. How to stand, fall, and rise independently
 - D. How to skip teamwork
4. Which skill did Paris develop through team projects?
 - A. Memorization
 - B. Emotional intelligence
 - C. Speed reading
 - D. Solo research

5. Why is interdisciplinary learning valuable?
- A. It helps students specialize in one narrow field
 - B. It replaces the need for mentors
 - C. It allows students to connect ideas across different domains
 - D. It reduces the need for critical thinking
6. What would Paris have missed if she entered the workforce at 15?
- A. Higher salary
 - B. Long-term maturity and intellectual development
 - C. More free time
 - D. A chance to avoid teamwork
7. What does the author say university provides that AI cannot?
- A. Faster information
 - B. Human growth and identity formation
 - C. Automatic problem-solving
 - D. Perfect accuracy

Vocabulary Section

Resilience

Interdisciplinary

Ethical judgment

Assumptions

Collaboration

Critical thinking

Foundation

Navigate uncertainty

Conceptual understanding

Transformation

Capstone Project

“My Future in the Age of AI” — Reflection, research, and creative output.

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Answer Key

True/False: T, F, T, F, T

Fill in the Blank: grow, Artificial, scientific, Life, more

Multiple Choice: 1B, 2C, 3C, 4B, 5C, 6B, 7B

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