

THE RIGHT TO A FIRST CHANCE

Doors for those already inside

When support arrives only after proof that you can already survive without it, a system may confuse developing potential with rewarding prior access. What kind of system would itself deserve the right to decide who gets a first chance?

Humanity has a peculiar talent for building perfectly reasonable rules that, once assembled, produce a very strange world. A fund wants to support professional artists, so it asks applicants to prove professionalism; an employer wants to reduce hiring risk, so an entry-level job asks for experience; a research fund wants projects that can be completed, so it looks at previous grants and publications; a bank wants its money back, so it prefers people with a credit history; a landlord wants a reliable tenant, so it asks for stable income and rental history; a state wants to protect social programmes from error and fraud, so it asks a person to prove that assistance is genuinely needed. Each rule can make sense on its own. Step back a few metres, however, and a systemic paradox appears: to receive help **entering** a system, you increasingly have to show evidence that you somehow **entered it already without the help**.

The door exists, and above it there may even be a bright sign saying ENTRY POINT. The handle is on the inside. Naturally, there is a PDF explaining the procedure.

An art competition. Did you bring your structural mechanics certificate?

Imagine an art competition. A person arrives to show the work, but before anyone looks at the portfolio they are asked to pass an exam in strength of materials, collect thirteen certificates, obtain two recommendations from academics, and bring confirmation from an accountant, two miners and a Hawaiian surfer that they are, in fact, an artist. There is also a form. No, there is no pen. Everything is modern now: the form is digital. First create an account, verify the email, install the app, confirm the app through the website, enable two-factor authentication and upload a document the system already received last year. The response will arrive only inside the app. Why not by email? Because the institution cares about personal data. Why, then, does the app ask for a name, address, phone number, date of birth, passport photograph, notification permission and show a lively interest in location? For security.

Forty minutes later, the person who came to an art competition has successfully demonstrated the ability to survive electronic identification, navigate institutional portals, maintain stable internet access, tolerate frustration and, in our deliberately excessive example, locate a friendly academic. One small question remains: **did anyone look at the paintings?**

The joke works because the mechanism is not entirely fictional. An administrative procedure stops being a neutral wrapper when access to artistic evaluation primarily tests digital literacy, bureaucratic competence, social connections, the ability to read regulatory language and the capacity to endure friction. The system then partly selects not the strongest artists, but the strongest artists **among those who survived the secondary examination**. This does not make every such procedure unfair. It does mean that the procedure changes the sample and should therefore be visible as part of the methodology rather than treated as administrative weather.

When an artist is already artist enough

Sociological evidence shows that this effect is not limited to jokes about forms. Julia Peters and Henk Roose examined public funding of visual artists in Flanders from 1965 to 2015 and found a pronounced **Matthew effect**: artists with stronger exhibition histories and prior grant success had better chances of receiving subsequent public support. Particularly revealing is the historical shift: before the 1990s, first-time applicants were more often given an opportunity to enter the grant system, while a later policy emphasis on professionalisation made the first grant harder to obtain. The study does not argue that established professionals should not be supported. It shows something subtler: a policy that becomes very good at supporting an already professional field may become less effective at **producing new participants in that field**. Peters & Roose, *Poetics*, 2022.

Two functions are easily hidden inside the single word support. There is support for the development of an already established participant, where implementation history, team capacity, reputation and institutional competence may be entirely appropriate criteria. Then there is support for entry, which exists precisely at the moment when some of those proofs **cannot yet exist**, because the first opportunity is what would create them. When the same selection logic tries to solve both problems, development of the new can quietly become a test of how closely the new already resembles the old professional field.

A professional artist does not hatch from an egg holding a CV, three completed grants, an institutional partner and a cash-flow spreadsheet in which even the studio kettle has a KPI. If a cultural system wants not only to service a field but to preserve its ability to generate new participants, perhaps it needs a separate architecture for first entry, one in which the work can be seen before the system asks how many other institutions have already agreed to see it.

Junior. Entry level. Three years of experience

In the labour market, the same mechanism has become a meme. A graduate finds a vacancy marked Junior or Entry level and opens it to discover that two or three years of relevant professional experience are required. For the first job, please provide evidence of the previous first job; candidates supply their own time machine. The International Labour Organization has explicitly described the Catch-22: young people cannot get work without experience and cannot acquire experience because

they cannot get the first job. Internships and apprenticeships make sense as bridges between education and employment when they actually train people rather than disguising unpaid labour. ILO, *Internships: Head start or labour trap?*.

Later ILO research adds an important detail: paid and well-designed internships are associated with better post-internship labour outcomes, particularly when there is mentoring, working conditions resemble ordinary employment and the placement lasts long enough for real competencies to develop. O'Higgins & Pinedo, ILO, 2018. Social inequality enters almost without announcing itself. An unpaid opportunity may formally be open to everyone, but it is easier to take if housing, family support, savings or some other reserve of time already exists. We may believe we are selecting for motivation while partly selecting for the ability to **afford a period of demonstrating motivation without pay**.

This is not merely a minor unfairness at the starting line. Early unemployment and unstable entry can leave long effects on income, employment and later trajectories, so the first entry point can influence not only the first salary but how later institutions read the person's biography. One rejection does not define a life, but enough locally reasonable rejections can create a history that a future employer reads as evidence of a weak trajectory. The system digs a hole, the person falls, and years later the limp risks being interpreted as evidence that the person was never good at walking.

Success enjoys meeting success

Robert K. Merton described the **Matthew effect** in science in 1968: already recognised scientists can receive more recognition and visibility for contributions, while less recognised researchers remain less visible. The idea became part of the broader account of cumulative advantage, where a small initial difference can generate a much larger later difference. Merton, *Science*, 1968.

The mechanism is especially visible in research funding. Thijs Bol, Mathijs de Vaan and Arnout van de Rijdt compared early-career researchers immediately above and below a funding threshold. Applicants were close in evaluation, but those who narrowly obtained early funding accumulated substantially more subsequent funding. The authors describe two mutually reinforcing processes: previous winners are evaluated more positively in later competitions, and successful applicants are themselves more likely to apply again. Bol, de Vaan & van de Rijdt, *PNAS*, 2018.

The point can be stated without turning it into an equation. **A person's merit is not the same thing as previous access to a system, but previous access can help merit become visible, tested and cumulative.** A first grant enables a project, the project enables a publication, the publication creates contacts, the contacts create invitations, and the invitations create further evidence on a CV. Ten years later, the difference between two people may be enormous even though it began as a small difference partly shaped by one early institutional decision. Past achievement remains useful evidence, but we should not quietly record the entire infrastructure of prior opportunity as a pure personal property of the winner.

This is not an attack on the idea that competence, work and results deserve recognition. It is a request to account more precisely for what we call merit. Talent with five attempts and comparable talent with one attempt are not participating in the same experiment. A person who swims across a river with their hands tied may be extraordinary; that is still a poor argument for building bridges that tie everyone's hands first.

The tragedy of reasonable rules

The deeper ethical turn begins when we refuse the comfort of a villain. It would be easy to explain everything through a malicious bureaucrat, a greedy fund, a lazy recruiter or a heartless bank. In reality, every actor may be behaving rationally within a local frame: the fund reduces the risk of project failure, the employer reduces the risk of a bad hire, the bank reduces default risk, the landlord reduces non-payment risk, and the state reduces error and fraud. No participant needs to be foolish or cruel for a cruel architecture to emerge in the aggregate.

When every institution minimises **its own** risk, uncertainty does not disappear. It changes address. Very often the uncertainty of the first step moves to the person standing at the entrance. The young artist finances the years before the first professional opportunity; the young worker finances the acquisition of "experience"; the founder is expected to prove demand before the capital that was supposed to help test demand arrives; the migrant must decode an administrative system in a language not yet mastered; the person without money must find time, energy and documents to obtain assistance because of the absence of money.

The tragedy is systemic: locally rational institutions can collectively privatise safety and transfer uncertainty to newcomers. The least protected person may receive the largest share of risk precisely because there is not yet enough history to prove reliability. The useful question is therefore not only who is at fault, but **whether the risk of the first attempt has been distributed fairly between the individual and the system**.

Assistance that must first be survived

Research in public administration has a developed concept for part of this problem: **administrative burden**. Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan distinguish learning costs, the work required to discover that a programme exists and understand its rules; compliance costs, the time and effort spent on forms, documentation, deadlines and procedures; and psychological costs, including stress, stigma and other effects of citizen-state interaction. Their 2025 review emphasises that these frictions can limit access even for people legally entitled to services and may be hardest to overcome for those with the fewest resources and greatest needs. Herd & Moynihan, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2025.

A dark comedy follows. A programme is designed for a person in crisis and access is tested with the question, “How well can you function while in crisis?” The person may be exhausted, unemployed, unfamiliar with the language and unable to understand the administrative system, so perhaps what is needed is seven offices, three portals, five passwords, twelve documents, a letter in which the simplest thought begins with *gemäß*, and a support line the person cannot use in the relevant language. Human-centred transformation successfully deployed. Green tick added.

Sarika Gupta’s experiment with a cash-transfer programme for disadvantaged women in Delhi shows the distinction between **formal entitlement** and **effective access** with unusual clarity. Only about one third of eligible people were enrolled. Providing information alone increased applications mainly among literate participants, while basic and intensive application assistance increased average application rates by about 41% and 70% respectively and expanded access among more vulnerable women. Gupta, *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 2026.

The women did not become more deserving, the programme did not become more generous, and eligibility did not change. The bridge between entitlement and realisation changed. That is why **“the information is on the website” is not the same as “the person has meaningful access”**, just as “we informed you” is not the same as “we helped you”. Sometimes an entire administrative civilisation lives between those two sentences.

Not every digital transformation is humanisation

Digitalisation is easily sold as an automatic synonym for progress. The paper disappears, the portal opens, the QR code appears, the app launches, and the annual report already smells like the future. But if the old procedure required six unnecessary actions and the new procedure requires the same six actions with an electronic signature, OTP, CAPTCHA, app and a PDF that weighs 5.2 MB instead of the permitted 5, the system has not become human-centred. It has merely **digitised its own friction**.

So not every digital transformation is humanisation; sometimes it is simply bureaucratisation with an electronic signature. Digitalisation asks how to move a procedure into a digital environment. Humanisation should ask an earlier question: **why does the person need to perform this step at all?** If the state already has the data, why enter it again; if entitlement can be established from existing registers, why require another application; if one contact could resolve the matter, why require three portals; if the digital channel does not work for a particular person, why should the alternative route become a punishment for insufficient digital fluency?

The OECD report *Modernising Access to Social Protection* notes that complex rules, information gaps and cumbersome procedures can produce non-take-up even when programmes are well designed and funded. It discusses linked administrative data and automatic enrolment as promising approaches while also emphasising legal, privacy and discrimination risks. A crucial point is that simply moving services online is not sufficient. OECD, 2024.

Sometimes the most advanced digital form is **no form at all**. A digital state that requires citizens to become increasingly competent operators of the digital state has not necessarily become more modern; it may simply have hired the citizen, unpaid, as a clerk in its own bureaucracy. In the old system a person could lose a piece of paper. In the new one the system can still lose the person, only with much better technology.

A gate can test the wrong property

This may be the central methodological bug. If a fund wants to identify a strong artist but its application requires sophisticated grant-writing competence, the fund partly tests grant-writing competence. If a company wants a promising junior but requires two years of experience, it partly tests whether someone else has already taken the risk of giving that person a first chance. If a social programme wants to reach people in need but the procedure is extremely difficult, it partly tests administrative competence under conditions of scarcity.

The ability to pass a gate is therefore **not identical to the property for which the gate was created**. This is not an argument against gates as such. A bank genuinely needs to assess risk, an employer competence, a fund implementation capacity, a state legal eligibility. The more precise questions are: what exactly does this criterion measure, which secondary properties does it reward, and who is systematically filtered out before the primary property is even tested?

Document 015 on Polytypic Thinking led MET[Ä]CADEMY to a related principle: prediction is not identity, and a type is not an essence. Here a social analogue appears: **absence of previous access is not evidence of absence of future capacity**. The past is useful evidence, but it should not automatically acquire the right to close the future.

The right to be not-yet-ready

Systems love ready-made people: the ready artist, ready employee, ready researcher, ready founder, ready citizen who already knows every form. But people often become ready **after they are allowed to be not-yet-ready inside a real task**. A student goes to work not because they are already an experienced professional but partly in order to become one. An early-career researcher receives a first project before having demonstrated the ability to run ten. An artist receives a first serious exhibition precisely because there could not have been a history of serious exhibitions before it. A founder looks for first capital before building the company that would no longer need first capital.

This sounds obvious until we notice how many institutions behave as though **adulthood should precede childhood**. Perhaps what is needed is a limited right to be unfinished within a safe first attempt, not a right to demand a positive outcome, but a right not to be disqualified merely because part of the required experience can only be produced **after entry**.

The most expensive resource may not be money

Perhaps the most expensive resource is **the right to make an affordable mistake**. Not the right to act without consequences, but the possibility of trying at a scale where failure does not destroy a biography. For a well-resourced person, a failed start-up may become “experience”; for a person without reserves, one failed month may become debt or loss of housing. One person can fail five times and write a book about perseverance on the sixth attempt; another spends years after the first failure trying to return to the starting line.

“Take more risks” is an easy instruction when someone else pays the risk. A humanised system would ask not only whether the person is brave enough, but **whether failure has been made affordable enough for the person to try**. This is not sentimentality; it is risk design. Innovation without the possibility of controlled failure quickly becomes a privilege reserved for people who can afford several unsuccessful lives inside one lifetime.

A first chance does not mean a grant for everyone

This is where a straw man can be built and heroically defeated. The right to a first chance does not mean every artist receives a grant, every applicant a job, every hypothesis a large budget or every risk public financing. **The right to a chance is not the right to a positive outcome**. Humanisation does not abolish selection; it changes the question of scale and function.

Perhaps the system needs a **proportionate way to test potential** without demanding proof of already-realised potential. Not immediately a large grant, but a small grant with a clear risk boundary; not a permanent contract, but a paid trainee path with genuine learning; not a major research budget, but an exploratory grant; not “we have declared you a genius”, but the more honest “we do not know yet, here is a safe way to find out”. Such a system does not promise infallibility. It recognises that uncertainty cannot be completely removed without removing the new along with it.

Some research funders already experiment with this kind of institutional humility. The Health Research Council of New Zealand’s Explorer Grants use anonymous assessment and, once proposals meet the required criteria, random ordering for funding until the available budget is exhausted: all qualifying applications are treated as equally eligible. HRC New Zealand, Explorer Grants. This does not prove that lotteries are superior everywhere. It demonstrates another kind of methodological honesty: after a threshold, a system can sometimes admit that **it does not know enough to turn tiny score differences into a metaphysics of merit**.

Perhaps we need a fair entrance more than a perfect selection system

What might a humanised entry point look like? Perhaps arts funding needs dedicated first-entry grants where the portfolio and a small testable proposal matter more than grant genealogy. Perhaps employment needs paid trainee and apprenticeship routes in which employers explicitly accept that some competence must be grown rather than purchased ready-made. Perhaps research needs first-funding mechanisms, blind elements, quality thresholds or partial randomisation where fine-grained rankings exceed real evaluative certainty. Perhaps social protection should use automatic enrolment when the state already has adequate data and provide real navigation for complex cases rather than links that merely explain how to navigate. Perhaps digital transformation should measure not the percentage of procedures placed online but the proportion of legitimate human goals that became meaningfully easier to achieve.

These mechanisms are not universal. Systems have different risks, scales and legal constraints. A shared principle may still be possible: **if a system exists to help a person move from A to B, it should not quietly require evidence that the person already**

lives in B. And if a gate is necessary, perhaps the system should be able to explain what property it tests, why that property matters, what the cost of error is, and who is filtered out as a side effect.

Measure not what the system offered, but what happened to the person

Institutions naturally count their own activity: programmes opened, money allocated, guidance pages published, consultations delivered, applications digitised. These are useful operational metrics, but they do not answer the central question. Humanisation shifts the focus from “what did the system offer?” to “**what actually happened to the person for whom the system exists?**”

If there is a programme for young specialists, perhaps it matters how many people without professional connections received their first paid experience. If there is a competition for new cultural voices, perhaps it matters how many first-time applicants reached substantive evaluation and what actually filtered out the others. If people have a legal right to a benefit, perhaps the core metric should not be the amount of published guidance but the share of eligible people who received it and the structure of those who disappeared on the way.

Administrative burden then stops being “the user somehow failed to cope” and becomes a property of the route: “**our process systematically filters out people like this.**” Only then can the more useful question be asked: are these really the people we intended to filter out?

Humanisation, or perhaps something deeper?

Up to this point we have been talking about **humanisation**: making institutions more understandable, accessible, proportionate, less traumatic and more attentive to real human trajectories. That is already substantial. Near the end, however, another suspicion appears. Humanisation can still sound like maintenance of the existing machine: keep its basic logic intact, make the buttons larger, simplify the language and add an adviser.

What if, in some cases, we need more than humanisation? What if we need what this essay calls **humanation**, a shift in the centre of gravity in which the person stops being merely “the user of a process” and the process becomes an instrument of a human purpose again? A form does not exist so that a form may be completed, a portal so that a portal may have users, a fund to manufacture grant applications, a university to manufacture academic procedures, or a social service to manufacture evidence that information about assistance was made available.

Humanation would not make the human being the centre of the universe or abolish the system’s right to rules. It could mean a more mature reciprocity: a system has the right to set conditions, a person has the right to agency, and rules must continuously remember **which human purpose they are serving**. When a rule no longer protects that purpose and primarily reproduces itself, perhaps the rule should have to pass an examination again.

The architecture of possibility

We began with an artist, then met the junior candidate with three years of experience, the young researcher whose first grant helps produce the next, the person required to demonstrate administrative competence to receive support at the very moment resources are lowest, and the digital system that can simplify access or merely move the old labyrinth onto an OLED screen. At some point it becomes clear that this is not an essay about grants, HR, welfare offices, art or even bureaucracy. It is about **the architecture of possibility**: who may move from “not yet” to “already”, who pays for the transition, who carries uncertainty, who is allowed to fail, how many times, and whether the absence of a previous victory is treated as evidence of future incapacity.

The MET[À]CADEMY Manifesto insists that an abandoned path may have been abandoned not because it was false but because an instrument, money, language, time, political will or a sufficiently stubborn successor was missing. It proposes preserving not only the history of what humanity discovered but also the history of what humanity **might have discovered**. In social terms, a difficult analogue follows: **an unrealised person is not the same thing as a person without potential**. Sometimes it is a person whose entry point was constructed in such a way that the future never obtained permission to become an experiment. MET[À]CADEMY OF HUMANITY Manifesto v1.2.

The future has no CV

A human-centred, perhaps eventually humanational system would probably permit more **correct mistakes**. Someone will receive a chance and waste it, someone will receive a small grant and produce mediocre work, a company will train a junior who leaves six months later, a researcher will test a beautiful hypothesis and get zero, someone will start a business and close it. This is a real cost of an open entry point, and pretending otherwise would be unethical.

The alternative also has a cost. A system can be designed to make very few errors at entry. There is a simple method: admit primarily those who have already proved they should be admitted. Such a system will be stable, predictable, professional, efficient and nearly error-free. It may also slowly lose the ability to see what is not yet in its database. The future has one very inconvenient administrative property: **the future has no previous experience of being the future.**

Artificial intelligence now intensifies the problem. If statistical systems become increasingly accurate at predicting who will become a successful artist, researcher, employee, founder, student or “reliable citizen”, that accuracy could help direct resources where they are likely to work. The same accuracy could also create the most sophisticated system of doors in history, doors that almost never open for the “wrong” person. Document 015 asked what happens when AI correctly recognises a type but the error lives in the type itself. Document 016 adds another question: **what happens when a prediction describes the past so well that it begins deciding who is allowed to have a future?**

We are used to asking whether a particular person deserves a chance. Perhaps sometimes the camera should turn around: **what kind of system deserves the right to decide who receives a first chance?** If tomorrow we can calculate with near-perfect accuracy which people are most likely to make good use of an opportunity, will we use that precision to support those for whom entry is harder, or will we finally build perfect doors that never open for a statistically inconvenient person?

And if the second option proves cheaper, more efficient and more accurate, **who will notice the people we could have become but did not become because the system learned to predict us too well before the first attempt?**

Sources and research anchors

This research essay develops principles from the MET[À]CADEMY OF HUMANITY Manifesto v1.2 concerning the absence of monopoly by any single mode of seeing, traceable provenance, preservation of abandoned paths and the right of systems to revise their own frames. Manifesto: <https://d4ttara.github.io/metacademy-of-humanity/manifesto/>.

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