

GLOBAL

Higher education at the crossroads

Tom P Abeles 22 April 2016 Issue No:410

Education in general, but post-secondary education in particular, is supposed to provide individuals with the skills to participate as citizens in the civic and cultural life of the community. Additionally, education is supposed to equip individuals with a basic or in some cases, a specific armamentarium to provide for their economic well-being and that of the wider community.

Changing social, cultural and economic circumstances have rebalanced these objectives to focus more on the skills needed for economic success. This has been particularly true as the student advanced beyond primary institutions and definitely as they progressed to post-secondary programmes.

Today there is, increasingly, greater emphasis on a balanced portfolio that emphasises skills and knowledge integrated with socio-cultural understanding in both the local and, increasingly, the global environment.

The shift towards demonstrable competencies allows individuals to assemble the needed capabilities from a number of institutions ranging from traditional academic campuses to museums and self-directed study unbounded by a physical structure or geo/political boundary. Important to this is the establishment of clear measures of competencies unbounded by traditional time-based, discipline-defined courses or programmes.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting this disruptive moment in post-secondary education. Globally, ranked medallion universities are now working on acceptance of MOOCs massive open online courses provided by other post-secondary institutions.

The major advantages from an academic perspective is the ability to direct students to high-quality programmes provided by collegial partners while freeing the institutions up to concentrate their capabilities in areas critical to their own programmes.

This is part of a larger movement that enables individuals to assemble a critical set of experiences in their competency-based programmes.

Garbage can models

The Internet and the ubiquitous smart phone, increasingly available internationally, changes the equation. Universities can no longer see themselves as a singular centre of knowledge.

The ability to travel physically and virtually and the ability to construct using advanced technologies, physically and virtually, add new experiential sources. For example, in the United States, alone, museums spend over US\$9 billion on education. Globally, libraries, archival centres and a variety of other institutions have become part of the learning environment.

The university as a cloistered centre is a physical reminder of times past. Its function and thus the function of its inhabitants, from administration to faculty and staff, is changing. The rise of predictive analytics that can track students progress and provide rapid response to support the individual provides a disruptive shift in relationships, perhaps best exemplified in Neal Stephenson's prescient novel, *The Diamond Age*.

Researchers who build and study systems class universities as garbage can models, to borrow a term from computer model builders that suggests how complex the model is because there is such variance

between institutions. Thus, while there are many management theories, trying to find a fit for one that can be used is much like trying to fit the foot of the ugly stepsister into Cinderella's glass slipper.

Complex systems theory even notes, at this juncture in time, that not only is the model unstable and changing but the world in which the university is embedded is changing. This is problematic for an enterprise that has its foundational knowledge resting on the past.

Knowledge paths

When one university expanded its campus, the walks between buildings were not installed. Rather the planners let the students travel between buildings, creating where the paths were to be installed. Today, universities are at this point with regards to programmes, content, sources for delivery and paths for validation.

Rather than let the various emergent efforts unfold, some succeeding and others failing, scores of institutions are already trying to lay the equivalent of knowledge paths. This is a paradigmatic example as described in Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen's model of disruptive change a world filled with cognitive dissonance.

On one hand there is the fear of homogenisation with MOOCs, turning with respect to African universities and the Bologna process in Europe. On the other hand, there is fear as alternative models of education propagate, such as educational systems where students travel around the world gaining a variety of experiences, or the rules for promotion and tenure change the current sinecure model of post-secondary faculty positions.

Perhaps of more, not fully explored, concern is the study that suggests that post-secondary institutions, today, are turning out more PhDs and even masters-level graduates than are necessary in a world where artificial intelligence is changing the knowledge landscape.

In the past, education, PreK->Gray or continuous lifelong learning, has been based on a lock-step, age-defined, time-based system where individuals went from school to employment to retirement. Universities have been at the tail of this educational chain. Yet, globally, the number of graduates who are unemployed or underemployed is growing and employers are rejecting graduates for weak skill sets and limited or even non-existent 'soft skills'.

Academics, content specialists for the most part, have abrogated their responsibilities based on their focus on the need to demonstrate disciplinary competence. Other 'institutions' and models are stepping in and universities at the administrative level are moving to embrace these complementary alternatives. Yet, as with other industries disrupted by innovation, there is a resistance to the inevitable.

For example, African social science faculty do not want to seem weak because they don't embrace the scholarly economic models of the western neoclassical economists yet they do not offer an alternative, such as the eclectic heterodox thinking that should be a more compatible alternative.

Management consultants want to have universities adopt strategic planning models in light of the perceived homogenisation of knowledge with the rise of MOOCs; yet, as suggested above, universities are embracing these models supported by geo/political forces that see the benefits even as they challenge the hegemony of traditional faculty structures.

Education globally is in transformation, PreK->Gray; the traditional university cluster as the centre of knowledge is changing.

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