

Envisioning a New 21st-Century Higher Education Model

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Background:

In recent years, a succession of new educational models has been held up as the future of higher education. A new generation of universities is centred around solving the world's most pressing issues. Case in point is the Singularity University whose mission is to address humanity's grand challenges by educating, inspiring, and empowering leaders to apply exponential technologies. Perhaps not as aspirational but no less relevant are models intent on meeting the emerging and evolving needs of the global economy. Take Minerva University whose students scored the highest in the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a standardised test that measures the critical thinking and problem-solving skills of the students. These are essential skills in some emerging subject matters such as Cybersecurity, analytics and big data. What do we teach students? Something that happened a long time ago or do we teach them how to think so they can be ready for the uncertain future and what lies ahead? Are broad-based general degree requirements still relevant in today's context or is skills acquisition the way to go?

How should universities evolve and keep up so that they can be relevant to society and more importantly, accessible to all? Do universities even want to keep up or will it fall upon some new universities to disrupt and bring about a new university model? A university re-imagined.

These are, but some questions that are being discussed in many boardrooms across the globe but the questions can be categorised under three main issues:

ISSUE 1: THE RISING COST

Is the 4-year degree still relevant or is it too long and too expensive and therefore inaccessible to many? What about the declining completion rates currently happening in many universities across the United States?

As invaluable as university education is, the rising costs is an issue of concern for many students before they embark on a degree. To compound matters, these increasing costs are accompanied by a diminishing field of well-paying jobs. In fact, experts predict that a significant number of roles and positions will disappear in time to come. Does it make sense to shorten the degree and remove non-essentials such as the general degree requirement, which is a series of courses taken outside one's chosen major often defended as a way to broaden students broad-based knowledge and to make them more rounded?

Some pundits have called them nothing but a cash cow - and an expensive and time-consuming extension of high school. Are they merely a revenue stream for the university?

With the average college graduate in the class of 2011 having over \$26,000 in student loans, when is enough is enough? Is it time to ditch the 4-year degree in favour of something shorter (2 years), relevant and cost-effective for students and university administrators?

Can a curriculum be based on the needs of society and needs of the student?

ISSUE 2: ONE SIZE FITS ALL?

Learners come in all shapes and sizes, quite literally. Some can absorb faster while others need more time and a different approach. It is, however, essential to inspire and motivate each one of them to reach their full potential.

Universities have traditionally adopted a linear learning model, meaning you follow a prescribed curriculum that takes you from a start point A to the end point B. If you check all the boxes along the way, you earn your degree. This typical university model is also teacher focused as opposed to student-centric.

The process of learning is managed by the teacher, while the university controls the process of getting a degree. This approach may have been adequate decades ago, but the reality of things has changed considerably. Students are increasingly demanding control of their learning journey.

The other issue with a linear approach is that it is expensive both in time and energy. While choice may appear to be available to an average student, it is somewhat limited to electives.

In the classroom, the “one-size-fits-all” approach to learning is also getting dated. Tailoring to individual learning styles or interests is practically unheard of. This makes higher education infinitely more expensive than it needs to be. If you factor in the cost of tuition, the other costs of housing, food and transportation, it's no wonder many students start their career deep in debt.

Is there an alternate learning model? Is self-directed learning the key? Do we allow students to choose what they would like to learn and when they want to learn? With teachers competing for students, teachers will need to innovate to attract students. Is this the way of the future?

This open learning model puts the student at the center of education, not the university.

ISSUE 3: NEW METHODS AND CURRICULA

In the age of digitalisation, teaching methods have or will continue to move away from the old-fashioned dated model of lectures at passive audiences. How will universities work with the myriad of online resources, free and paid including their own to engage a new generation of students who are more interested in self-directed and interactive approaches?

Will universities also require budding professors to be properly trained in the methods of instruction for a classroom experience that is engaging and two-way? Will there be more student centred forms of criteria to evaluate learning and learning outcomes? How about the use of team and peer-led teaching models as alternatives to the antiquated professor/student dynamic? Is tenure hurting universities? Is the way forward to do away with tenure so that professors of tomorrow come with industry experience and remain engaged in industries?

CONCLUSION

Universities need a need model of learning in which students are not overly burdened by the costs of attending university and the costs of running the university is not spiraling upwards, and in which students are not merely repositories of knowledge and passive recipients, while at the same time taking learning to new peaks of excellence.