

Technology will disrupt traditional education system

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The current education system is ripe for disruption. Historically, institutions have positioned themselves as knowledge leaders and the primary place to receive expertise to prepare students for the workplace. However, in the age of free online courses from the world's top universities and part-time study sites, such as edX and Coursera, that information is becoming widely available outside the system.



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Universities are facing a future where students will be able to study online with reputable and internationally recognised institutions for a relatively cheap fee, potentially even free. In the online space, education is becoming more commoditised and there will be a few global winners, dominated by well-known education brands that collaborate with technology companies.

Technology will fundamentally influence the next era of higher education, with most institutions aware that they must incorporate technology into their offering. However, the use of technology in the learning space is not a matter of simply bolting an online learning platform onto an existing teaching and learning approach - it is far more challenging than that. The changes heralded by the digital era question the role of a traditional education institution, particularly relating to what is expected from institutions in an age where change is accelerating, and information is widely and freely available.

Changing workplace

The value of work too is undergoing major transformation due to the introduction of automation and artificial intelligence technologies. This means the old model of knowledge-heavy competencies being taught to students currently will not be the skills needed to survive and add value in an ever-evolving world of work.

The need to have knowledge-focussed curricula is falling away to the need to have curricula aimed at developing 'indirect competencies'. This includes critical and creative thinking, problem solving, collaboration skills and an ability to be comfortable with ongoing change. Without noting this change, institutions will not be able to rely on providing the golden ticket to a job as may have been possible in the past.

Relevant approach towards higher education

What role then, should local education establishments play in the future? The better question is, what unique value do we see them providing in this new era of education?

Recognition needs to be given to the fact that developing the 'indirect competencies' that are needed for creating valuable work in the future comes through prioritising learning opportunities that are authentic, dynamic, contextual and collaborative. All characteristics that are difficult to do well in a purely online-scaled education approach.

We see local institutions moving towards a model of providing a journey of experience, rather than exclusively imparting knowledge. In this model, the institution acts as guide, playing a facilitator role, becoming an expert in journey curation as opposed to just a knowledge leader. The curriculum would be designed to develop students through a multi-faceted experience where knowledge is an enabler of the process, rather than the outcome itself.

This model is characterised by a much greater emphasis on integration between stakeholders and managed relationships between employer and the institution. There are significant practical aspects embedded into the curriculum, or ideally work-integrated learning opportunities where students do some form of apprenticeship. Recognition would be given to the uniqueness of each student and the journey made adaptable and flexible enough to accommodate their individual needs, including emotional, cultural and financial requirements.

Workplace integration is key

We need to stop seeing the university as its own little bubble of an environment. Instead, the institution must be intertwined with the workplace, working alongside companies to solve real problems. The idea of the journey then extends into the period after the student has graduated, where the relationship between students and institution continues well into their working career. In this way, lifelong learning opportunities are created, where learning becomes a reflection of the real world, as opposed to a hypothetical one, and the ongoing relevance of the institution is maintained.

Developing a holistic student armed with 'indirect competencies' is essential if South African institutions want to thrive and maintain their relevance against strong global academic institutions in an online world.

For more information, go to www.embury.ac.za.

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