

Higher education in a disrupted world

By Professor Ahmed Shaikh, issued by Regent Business School

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Higher education institutions have long been considered to be the repositories of knowledge and learning and the structures through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. They have survived sweeping societal changes created by technology - the moveable-type printing press, previous Industrial Revolutions, information and communication technologies, electronic media, and computers.



Today, however, higher education institutions appear to be susceptible to technology disruption as much as other information-centric industries such as the news media, magazines and journals, encyclopaedias, music, movies, and television. This can be reflected in the fact that the transmission of knowledge does not have to be tethered to a fixed location or campus. The technical affordances of cloud-based computing, AI-based learning platforms, massive open online courses (MOOCs), high-quality streaming video, and 'just-in-time' information gathering have pushed vast amounts of knowledge to the 'placeless' World Wide Web. This has sparked a re-examination of the role of contemporary higher education institutions within society.

Indeed, higher education institutions are being disrupted by a wide variety of social and technological forces. Developments including the globalisation of services work, the increasing value of domain expertise, rapid developments in educational technology and the rise of online open courses are creating both challenges and opportunities for incumbents as well as new entrants. The unbundling of research, educational delivery, content, and block chain certification means that new business models and ways of engaging students will be at the heart of future higher education landscape.

With the world in a state of major transition, education in general, and higher education in particular becomes critical in this seismic shift because the transitions being experienced are centred on two essential elements - knowledge and skills. In addition, the pace of the decay of knowledge has increased significantly. In the past, a university student would enrol for a degree, graduate, and live off the knowledge obtained for at least 10 years. Today, by the time a qualification is achieved, the knowledge and competencies need to be refreshed. By just about any measure, the pace of decay of knowledge is increasing.

One of the implications of this rising pace of knowledge decay is that we must be specialists. Without world-class expertise

in our domain we are reduced to being commodities. As these pools of deep knowledge around the world are connected, the phenomenon of collective intelligence is beginning to emerge. While this idea is not new, it is only in the last decade that we have become so richly connected (through technology) that collective intelligence is moving from a dream to reality. This is a major shift in who we are, our human identity, and in how we learn.

A former director of Xerox PARC laboratory, John Seely, wrote in 2011 that the half-life of a skill is five years (and shrinking). This means that half of what is learnt today will become obsolete in five years or less. This idea is receiving a great deal of attention from leaders of higher education institutions, who must plan for a future in which students will need to keep learning new skills ever more frequently before and after they graduate.

The advent of and necessity for continual re-skilling will impact most on the graduate professional education segment, which has traditionally been structured around one- and two-year master's degree programmes. A widely held view is that such graduates will consume this lifelong learning in short spurts when they need it, rather than in relatively lengthier blocks of time as is the case presently.

However, the most important challenge will involve a shift in the way students consume higher education. Participation in tertiary education is set to increase. New educational technologies could open the doors to new knowledge for a wider audience, if the current social stratification of access and usage patterns could be overcome.

Consequently, higher education institutions like Regent Business School are learning to be nimbler, entrepreneurial, student-focused, and accountable for what students learn. New learning styles and mounting financial and sustainability pressures are impacting the education landscape.

Equally, there appear to be many trends, pressures, and concerns that society through its political and economic leadership is imposing on higher education institutions. A cacophony of voices, a diversity of expectations, and contradictory requests are all evident. There is no doubt that the world finds itself in a precarious situation where constant change is ubiquitous and responses are slow. Moreover, it has been frequently argued that higher education is a 'consumer market'. Such a market would exceed a billion 'customers' with varying behaviour and demands. Higher education institutions will have to adapt to changing consumer behaviour trends, whilst maintaining a focus on the balance between disciplinary skills, in-demand skills and employability competences.

In today's job market there is an increasing need for training and retraining of individuals. Thus, a focus on job-oriented education and on economic participation is driving an emphasis on relevance or on what can be called vocationalism—and thus changing the demand structure for higher education with profound effects on the support of, demand for, and appropriate preparation of participants for a rapidly changing job market that requires 21st century skills and competencies.

In the Fourth Industrial Revolution (and its attendant skills revolution) the number of jobs involving routine skills has shrunk as a result of increased automation. Artificial intelligence technologies like machine learning and computer vision are permanently eliminating low-skill jobs. The trend in economies is to turn from manufacturing to service, in which most new jobs do not require advanced education. Rather, human skill in creativity, imagination and problem solving will become key differentiators in a hybrid workforce that involves collaboration between human talent and technology in the form of smart machines and robots.

Finally, in conceding that education in general, and higher education in particular are on the brink of huge disruptions, two major questions have become paramount. What should young people be learning? and what credentials will indicate that they would be ready for the workforce?

We believe that in order to remain relevant, higher education will have to fundamentally reorganise its current (post-industrial) model and engage in deep curriculum reform in order to match the skills revolution required for a complex and uncertain future.

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Professor Ahmed Shaikh is an Academic and Researcher and the Managing Director of Regent Business School.

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