

CREATING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

HIGHER EDUCATION FACES
TWELVE KEY CHALLENGES

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION

How can universities and colleges respond to the need for greater access by creating quality, relevant programs, providing improved equity through more flexible approaches to learning? This question is the basis of discussion and debate taking place in institutions, governments, businesses, and conferences worldwide.

Underlying this quest for strategies, theories, and best practices is a basic optimism, a strong belief in the essential role of post-secondary education in improving the lives of individuals, communities, and societies. Incisive thinking and honest dialogue focus on students and their success both inside and outside the institutions. The exchange of ideas, plans, and potential is guided by fundamental values, such as access, flexibility, equity, quality, openness, and achievement.

A brief look at current discussions taking place at national and international venues reveals some of the shared aspirations of institutions.

These commentaries reflect on the importance of context for each nation, as well as bringing forward twelve key themes emerging from the discussions. Both content and some criticism of these themes are presented.

A NEW ENVIRONMENT FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IS EMERGING

A seeming consensus can be found concerning the goals of colleges and universities; in many ways, these expectations can be characterized as pressures on institutions. Students, parents, employers, governments, and taxpayers in general expect universities and colleges to deliver on these goals. What had been characterized as the “ivory tower” is now far more integrated into the personal, economic, cultural, environmental and other aspects of the society. Institutional contributions and transparency are more closely scrutinized, as well as rewarded and debated.

Shared aspirations arising from international discussions:

- To increase access to post-secondary education while at the same time providing quality programs and courses which students successfully complete.
- To create relevant programs which contribute to the social and economic agendas of communities and nations.
- To provide flexible approaches to learning that leverage technologies and other strategies aimed at increasing success in post-secondary education and developing the capacity for lifelong learning.

CONTEXT MATTERS

In all of the discussions concerning national and international post-secondary education, the achievement of the above goals can never be divorced from the context in which they were generated. What has been developed and works well in Brazil is not likely to work in the same way and with the same outcomes in Slovenia or South Africa.

Context determines what is possible for these compelling reasons:

- Cultural values and histories shape future possibilities within institutions and nations. For example, some cultures have no tradition of such services as distance learning while in others there is a hundred year history.
- Infrastructure – both in terms of human and technological capacities – differs significantly between nations and regions within nations.
- Regulatory and legal conditions vary significantly.
- The focus for higher education differs between jurisdictions – with some stressing employability and others a liberal education.

- Assumptions about learners need to be contextual – some learners have significant learning skills and competencies derived from an extensive primary and secondary education and their own self-directed and shared learning. In other jurisdictions, the quality of primary and secondary education is such that learning competencies cannot be assumed.
- The incentives and encouragement to pursue post-secondary education differ considerably, with some groups and nations facing considerable disadvantages for economic, social, and other reasons.

The message from the exchanges on context is clear: no one size fits all. Each institution, government, or agency needs to determine what is best for their environment. Best practices and innovations developed elsewhere need to be adapted and pilot tested before being included in local offerings or services.

ALL OVER THE WORLD
TWELVE MAJOR
CHALLENGES ARE
BEING DISCUSSED

Conference presentations and reports, formal and informal discussion, Twitter feeds, and other sources of access to national and international discussion on post-secondary education reveal twelve focal points:

- 1. Balancing scale and quality in achieving equity.** Which is more important – scale (pushing for “massification”) or quality? While some opinions hold that a focus on increasing access through innovative approaches to learning means that quality will follow, most are of the view that quality and growth have to go hand in hand.
- 2. Combining quality and innovation.** Others raise the issue that a focus on quality as this construct is currently understood acts an inhibitor for innovation. Many of the current quality assurance policies and practices of institutions and governments reflect only classroom-based learning, ignoring the unique characteristics and outcomes of online and flexible learning approaches. Faculty members are discouraged from attempting new strategies as their efforts might not meet narrowly-focused standards.
- 3. The need to take a systems approach to the experience of post-secondary education.** Higher education institutions in any jurisdiction form an ecosystem which is both adaptive and resilient. When one institution in such an ecosystem changes, this has implications for other institutions in that system. The extension of this idea necessitates the involvement of elementary and secondary education in discussions about future requirements and goals. A true ecosystem approach would embrace learning as lifelong, with post-secondary as a critical but not independent factor.
- 4. The systems approach needs to encompass student flexibility and mobility.** Students increasingly look at the panoply of offerings in their locality and around the world as the basis for the choices they are making. This requires the rethinking of such components of the system as course and program articulation, prior learning assessment, work based learning for credit, and the use of e-portfolios. A key requirement for an equitable system of higher education is learner mobility. Such a focus requires extensive system collaboration (among colleges, universities, public interests, private enterprises) aimed at enabling enhanced learner mobility – both physical and virtual mobility.
- 5. Leveraging of available resources.** A lot of energy can be spent reinventing the wheel, especially curriculum resources, but also student services and business models for online and flexible learning. While

localizing course materials is recognized as important, the resistance to open educational resources (OER) remains tangible. A part of the challenge for OER is abundance – over 1 billion OERs are available. A request from many voices has been the development of databases of approved or recommended OERs so that choices are narrowed and made practical in response to the time and energy restraints for faculty. It may not be faculty reluctance that is impeding the adoption of OERS, but the need for easier access to resources of proven quality, as well as support and training on their use and adaptation.

- 6. Unbundling of the components of learning services.** An underlying challenge in the business model of institutions is the emphasis on the role (and rights) of the professor to determine what and how they will teach. There is potential for this work to be unbundled - separating the design and development of courses from their delivery, separating the delivery of courses from assessment and separating assessment from credentialing. This would mean changes in faculty roles. The key to accelerating the use of OER and the growth of flexible and distance learning is to focus on building the capacities and skills of instructors and the providers of student services.
- 7. Developing a new generation of faculty members.** Many of the national and international discussions focus on the future role of those who teach. There are several issues here:
 - the readiness of existing and new instructors to adopt new approaches to pedagogy;
 - the ability of professoriate to leverage the knowledge and skills of instructional design and neuropsychology for the design and development of courses and programs;
 - the need to build the capacity of the professoriate to leverage ICT and new approaches to learning and teaching.

Undermining many of the innovative approaches to teaching and learning are the reward and recognition structures in institutions, which may undervalue teaching or course design and development.

- 8. Tradition or evidence.** An issue brought up in many contexts concerns the evidence base for practice – to what extent are developments in higher education based on evidence rather than hunches or the way things have always been done? The institutions that have a mandate for social research often seem reluctant to turn the same fine-tuned eye on their own competencies and practices in terms of their primary role and dedicate research energy and funding of what works, and doesn't work, for learning.
- 9. An emphasis on differentiated instruction.** Equity needs to be defined not just in terms of access but also success - an open door should not be a revolving door. To make this happen, there is a need to expand the practice of differentiated instruction and to develop different kinds of student supports to meet the learning and support needs of students of different backgrounds and abilities. A commitment to equity requires a key commitment to differentiation.
- 10. MOOCs and learning.** MOOCs continue to be a topic of significant conversations, with some seeing them as disruptive, with considerable potential for improving access and equity. Others see MOOCs as a distraction. A need is recognized to have a deeper conversation and to engage with the key MOOC providers (Coursera, EdX, FutureLearn, etc.)

in strategic conversations. Multiple ongoing questions surround MOOCs – such as the nature of learning, the ways of usefully integrating them into higher education, the quality of assessment (if this occurs), and the different nature, educational levels, and learning needs of the vast number of MOOC participants. These concerns position MOOCs as something that seems to remain apart from traditional higher education – with uncertainty as to whether they are threat, opportunity, or passing fad.

11. Minority languages and the danger of language imperialism. Those with languages other than English and Chinese are concerned that it is increasingly difficult to find OERs and relevant materials and supports in their languages. As dominant language programs are available online globally, how will minority languages be able to fund, develop, and access appropriate resources? The underlying concern is that the developments of materials and resources will be driven by market factors rather than community need.

12. Coping with technological change. Although emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and digital implants do not figure prominently in the conversations, this may be more the content of events focused on educational futures. Most institutions are looking at existing, and constantly evolving, technologies (tablets, smart phones, LMS systems, and social media) to determine how they can best be used for and integrated into learning, and how faculty and students can be supported in applying them to teaching, learning, communication, student support, and assessment.

THREE PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO GET TO THE FUTURE

Of course, the discussions outlined and commented on here move beyond the statement of the concerns, challenges, and changes. Participants at national and international venues also focus on practical approaches that are seen as promising the most effective and immediate results. Three of the most prominent approaches are:

Collaboration and Sharing. Rather than competing, there needs to be a strong focus on sharing and collaboration within higher education ecosystems and across such systems. Collaboration has been described as the “[DNA of the knowledge economy](#)” and is a preferred option over the market based and competitive approaches favoured in some systems.

1. Evidence Based Support for Decision Making. There is a growing sense of the need for evidence of a variety of kinds – e.g. best practice models, risk analytics, game changing examples, and big data analytics – on which to base decisions for change and development. To address the challenges and opportunities for post-secondary education, evidence provides the basis for critical changes.

2. Demonstration or Flagship Projects. Many suggest the importance of tracking some model or demonstration projects or activities intended to have an impact on equity and other key goals of higher education. These would be deliberately established as co-operative projects aimed at significant, clearly articulated impact – fully researched and evaluated with the aim of building models which others can borrow so as to improve access, quality, equity, flexibility, and success in learning.

Many critical factors in education – pedagogy, delivery, faculty, quality, resources, technology, and equity – are found in this look at the content of some of the national and international conversations on post-secondary

education. One revealing point is that the conversations no longer focus on technology as the solution or as the greatest challenge. Instead, thinking about technology has now been encompassed in the broader considerations of teaching, learning, access, equity, and quality. Accompanying this is an evident eagerness to learn from each other, to share solutions and best practices, to contribute to and benefit from the 'internationalization' of higher education.

