

Future of Higher Education - 2050

Concept Note

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Future Studies

The nature of education is future-oriented because it is meant to equip students with knowledge, skills, and attitude that it is hoped that will be useful in future. To assist higher education institutions, cope with a changing environment, it is important that universities think and act strategically to address the outcomes they want to achieve. Thinking and researching about the future, according to Mannermaa (1986) “is not the study about the ‘future’ per se, but it is about the “present reality and the historical knowledge of the past” (p.658). The idea is to consider desirable features that are worth strengthening, threats that need to be eliminated and probable lines of development that are worth noting (Dator, 2009; Mannermaa, 1986). “Being future-fit in a challenging and uncertain context requires identifying a number of different plausible future scenarios, exploring what impacts they could have and identifying potential implications for policies” (OECD, 2020). Policies are critical because they reflect the aspirational visions that have been used to set the agenda for the future of education (Kozma, 2005; Pavlova, 2013).

Policies are made up of predictive statements of desired outcomes which provide a vision for how the education system should and might look like in future (Pavlova, 2013). Hence, policies provide ways in which goals may be reached. Even education policies that have been used to guide strategic plans, did not address the future that may include disruptions that may be caused by climate change, digitalisation of societies, globalisation, political turbulence and mostly pandemics that recently impacted education adversely. This shows that much of our thinking about the future tends to be linear and based on existing trends even though we do not know in advance what is likely to change and in what context (OECD, 2020). Although trends analysis helps us “to tell the difference between what is constant, what is changing, and what is constantly changing” (OECD, 2020), it is also necessary to consider disruptions that may impact the future. Our present knowledge may not necessarily be accurate and adequate for predicting the future, human beings never stop thinking about the future (Dator, 2009). Unfortunately, when higher education institutions are faced with disruptions and high uncertainty, attempting to predict the future is not a priority. In time of upheavals, the tendency is to focus on short term solutions and in the process ignore what is likely to be faced after the crisis settles. It is precisely during the crisis, according to Olcott (2020), that

the focus should also be on the long term and to think and act strategically in terms of outcomes to be achieved in the future.

Higher education institutions are expected to lead change by contributing meaningfully to the economic and social development of the country; increasing civic participation; advancing educational reform; and promoting the culture of peace and non-violence (Kozma, 2005; Nasruddini, Bustemi, & Inayatullah, 2012; OECD, 2020). These institutions are key to the development of knowledge and skills as well as responding to new skills demands that requires flexible structures (Arbo & Benneworth, 2007; Chatterton & Gordard, 2000). Responding to the new demands requires new kinds of resources and new forms of management that enable higher education to be resilient in the future (Arbo & Benneworth, 2007). Hence, it is important to visualise how higher education can look like in 2050. There are many studies that have developed scenarios and analysed trends that are likely to impact the future of higher education. Governments especially in developing countries commissioned studies on the future of education and many people contributed to this topic in journal articles, blogs, social media and in many platforms. What is clear is that higher education is has to transform to be in line with the current as well as the future needs of the world. According to the Educause Horizon Report (2020), Higher Education institutions need to adapt and rethink of how they'll accommodate the changing demographic of students; the different degree pathways that students will require; and the prevalence of online learning. All these factors will contribute to the policy development for higher education. Policies that are going to guide the development of higher education in the future needs to consider some of the current features that may catapulted to the future.

Higher Education in 2050.

Identifying features that are worth strengthening may assist to explore possible alternative future developments while taking into consideration changing dynamics and uncertainties (Steinmüller, 2018). Hence, the plausible higher education sector in 2050 will be more open, digitalised, personalised and collaborative.

1. Openness

The main principle of openness in education is to address the fundamental right of access to education as outlined in the United Nations Article 26, which states that, "Everyone has the right to education ... technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall provide equal access to all on the basis of merit". This shows that the United Nations recognises the importance of open education in expanding access to quality education, boosting literacy and providing high level skills that the knowledge economy requires (Bindè, 2005). The term "open" does not only address access, but it also empowers an individual to have the ability to create, modify and use information and knowledge in such a way that it is personalised to an individual. An essential characteristic of open education is the removal of barriers to learning, which entails no prior qualifications, no

discrimination by gender, age or religion, and affordability for everyone (Teixeira, Bates, Mota, 2019). Openness is also about flexible structures that enable access to as many people as possible using a variety of routes that are both formal and non-formal. Trends in higher education show the increasing popularity of opening up access to affordable education through more flexible provision and greater use of open pedagogy is likely to continue way into the future.

Hodgkinson-William and Trotter (2018) and Lambert (2018) argue that open education should be understood in relation to its social justice mandate. In many developing countries there has been a large number of people who have been excluded from quality educational and open education has been perceived as a way of opening up at low costs. It is therefore important that institutions of higher learning should consider the social justice aspirations particularly in times where there is an increasing need to decrease inequality (Lambert, 2018). The social justice mandate, which is meant to address historical institutionalised injustice, should be aligned to universities policies and strategic documents.

2. Digitalisation

As traditional higher education institutions open up and start providing digital flexible education at a large scale, open and distance education universities will have to introduce new competence-based and modular forms of learning assessment and certification (Teixeira, et. al., 2019). Technology has revolutionised education and the rapid changes necessitated by Covid-19 lockdown brought this to the fore as never before. This shows that higher education institutions are likely to respond to the perceived benefits of enhancing technology-enhanced teaching and learning through delivering knowledge flexibly and efficiently (Schulte, Cendon & Makoe (2020). The increased digitalisation of education and the impact of Covid-19 will lead to new ways of doing things in higher education. Therefore, higher educational institutions need to develop their own institutional strategies to ensure that the integration of technologies into education is well supported.

3. Personalisation

The personalisation of learning approach offers flexible opportunities for students which is what is needed in the future. The concept of personalisation of learning is based on the use of learning analytics that are utilised to tailor educational services to the individual student (Schulte, Cendon & Makoe (2020). In 2050, individual students will choose their best options to customise and personalise their individual learning experience. The idea is to use processes and practices that are flexible to respond to unique needs of an individual. This approach ensures that all students are included by offering multiple programmes for diverse students. The flexible movement of students and lecturers is seen as key to opening up education as well as supporting professional collaboration.

The personalisation of learning will also recognise experiences of adult students and disadvantaged groups who do not fit with typical admission rules and regulations of formal education institutions. Fostering lifelong learning will serve as an enabling space to provide lifelong learners the competencies that are needed to perform in a new environment. It is therefore the task of higher education institutions to create learning opportunities that meet possible future requirements from teaching and learning as well as the development systems and structures that enable and able and support teaching and learning.

4. Collaboration and partnership

To provide support for this new open, personalised and digitalised way of teaching and learning, higher education institutions will need to pool together their knowledge on pedagogical and technological resources to facilitate openness in higher education. There'll also be increased collaboration of higher education institutions with industry, government, innovators and civil society. Higher education institutions will have to work the private sector and the civil society to ensure its sustainability and its resilience in highly competitive environment. Universities that are going to succeed are those that are able to move beyond their comfort zone and explore innovative ways of working with other stakeholders.

Policy development

The success of these aspirations are reliant on the political will and an enabling policy environment. Education policies play a pivotal role in providing a vision meant to support economic growth; promote social development; and advance educational reform (Kozma, 2005; Nasruddini, Bustemi, & Inayatullah, 2012). Hence, education policy makers tend draw from the social and economic policies to provide a set of goals, and a vision of how the education system might look like if it has to address the future needs of the economy. Mannermaa, (1986) argues that an education policy “that does not have any direct or indirect impact on the development of the society is totally useless” (p.662). Therefore, policies that are developed now should address the following goals: the need to facilitate openness in higher education; the planned expansion of higher education to go beyond the formal provision of education; the development of the systems, structures and practices to support the digitalisation of education; the equitable expansion of education to include those students' population that are excluded from participation in higher education; and to provide curriculum to address the development needs of developing countries.

It is therefore important that higher education institutions rethink their teaching and learning approaches in order to address the deepened inequalities and to create sustained learning conditions that are needed. By so doing, they will be re-visioning the future of higher education in order to achieve its objective of making purposeful contributions to the learning environment while tackling social, political and economic needs in the world.

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