

Ahmad Y. Majdoubeh

Professor of English

VP for Humanities

University of Jordan

Amman – Jordan

February 28, 2021

Vision of Higher Education in 2050

It goes without saying that trying to project a 2050 scenario for what the higher education scene could, or should, be and how it could better futures is no easy task. On the one hand, we live in a fast-changing world. And this is a fact to reckon with. As a result of the advanced and advancing information & communication technologies (ICT) brought about by the 3rd, 4th and 5th industrial revolutions, so much of what we know and do changes so quickly, on an annual or even less basis. So, what would happen to higher education thirty years from now? Naturally, a lot would happen – in significant and fundamental ways. This we are sure of. We hope that, as a result of intelligent planning and prompt action, what materializes works to our advantage, and not the opposite. The Frankenstein and Brave New World scenarios, and their many actual manifestations, are still pretty much alive in our consciousness. But so are the social media outlets which many have come to see as subversive, rather than advantageous or constructive. On the more positive side, of course, several emerging technologies in the past thirty years – such as the laptop, the cellular phone, the various synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms, etc. – have been a true blessing. If humanity does its homework well, the higher education scene in 2050 could be, overall, what we wish it to be; and we could go where no one has gone before.

On the other hand, quick advances in ICT take time for people to be able to employ effectively and meaningfully. From my 36-year experience in higher education, as a teacher and administrator, I have learned a couple or more lessons about the use of technologies for pedagogical purposes. One is that technology is always ahead of teachers and, even, students. It simply takes time for all forms of ICT to be used easily, smoothly, and effectively in the classroom or outside it. Educational theories and educational technologies take time to digest and put to actual use by those involved in the world of education. For example, we in this part of the world have been talking about e-learning and wanting to employ it in actual, effective ways since the mid-to-late 1990s. Not until a few years ago, however, have we been able to introduce some small aspects of it in our programs. Much of it, in fact, came to us by force as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which brought our predominantly face-to-face educational system to a total halt, and compelled us to go fully “online” without many students and teachers knowing what that actually meant. In this sense, 2050 is not that far away. More importantly, not much could

happen, in meaningful concrete ways, in the realm of higher education even by then. This is especially true in our part of the world, for from 1984 (when I started my university teaching career) till the COVID-19 pandemic hit about a year ago, the form and substance of our pedagogies in the so-called “lecture” halls have been more or less the same: essentially talk and chalk; with some PowerPoint presentations that are basically script. This is a sad fact, but true – despite a lot of talk about the need for change, and a lot of scenarios and wishes. I am not saying this because I am a pessimist – quite the opposite, as I have always been an advocate of development and involved in some exciting pioneer projects. But I am saying it because I am a realist.

The above two prefatory notes to the 2050 scenario I am about to depict are important to keep in mind. But it is also important to keep in mind a third prefatory note; namely, that what I will be saying here is related essentially to the higher education scene in my part of the world. Since I joined university in 1984, I have been engaged regionally and internationally. For about ten years, in fact, I was actively taking part in a host of activities connected to the European Bologna Process. Nevertheless, the benchmark for me has always been what materialized in the educational system I am part and parcel of: ours. This is why the scenario I will be depicting in terms of what the higher education scene would look like in 2050 and how it could contribute to better futures will be the scenario largely determined by what I see happening to our part of the world within the realm of higher education.

Now to the scenario.

The 2050 higher education system I would like to see in our part of the world, based on my experience to date and based on the developments that could realistically happen, is a system marked by three milestone outcomes, among others of course: a system based on blended learning, on interdisciplinarity, and strong international engagement.

Regarding blended learning, let’s first of all give it a definition: the standard definition. It is a system of education which combines or “blends” face-to-face, on-campus education as we know it (better even, an enhanced version of it) and online learning (essentially off-campus and asynchronous).

As stated above, our higher education system, which commenced with the establishment of the University of Jordan (UJ) in 1962, has been almost exclusively face-to-face, class-room based, textbook-reliant, exam-focused, and professor-centered. Some (minor) reforms and changes have been injected into it under the slogans: learning rather than teaching, participatory classes rather than “lectures,” critical-thinking rather than rote-learning, higher skills rather than “lower” skills; etc. The fact of the matter, however, is that at bottom, at its core, the system remained largely as traditional as when it started.

In 2016, a milestone step was taken at UJ, the “mother” university from which most national creative ideas emerge: an initiative aimed at introducing blended learning. UJ had, of course, like most universities in the country and the region, intended to introduce e-learning as far back as

the year 2000, if not a little before. It invested in the necessary infrastructure, including a learning platform, computer labs, and some basic regulations encouraging the introduction of e-learning. It also held many orientation and training courses. As a result, several faculty members across the various schools introduced forms of e-learning in their courses; some more mature and interesting than others. It also introduced computerized exams and did extremely well at this level. Pedagogically, however, the classes remained totally face-to-face with some enrichment e-material, with different faculty members doing different things, but with no uniform or coherent structure.

The 2016 closely-coordinated blended-learning initiative was launched for the three-fold purpose of: a) switching from a teaching to a learning mode, b) embedding technology in learning, and c) endowing students with skills that enable them to compete and make it in the job market (such as communication skills, self-learning skills, teamwork skills, etc.) The experience proved an instant success. We started with two faculty members in the spring semester of 2016/2017, two courses, and about 60 students, and ended up, just before the pandemic hit, with 200 teachers (out of 1600), 600 courses, and 30 thousand students. A giant leap.

When the COVID-19 took us by surprise in March 2020, one main reason why UJ adapted more quickly and smoothly than others to full online learning is because of its highly structured 4-year experience with blended learning.

So many details can be included here, but for the sake of this brief concept note, let me underscore that the main reason why I am proposing blended learning as the scenario for 2050 is that: a) it is the most realistic and suitable fit, as it combines the best of face-to-face education and the best of online, b) it embeds technology nicely and naturally in the learning process, c) it serves well the switch from the teaching to the learning mode (especially in the asynchronous dimension of online learning), d) it makes learning more fun and the students and teachers more creative, e) it keeps the campus experience, which we have learned from the abrupt switch to full online to be essential to university-age students, as basic and crucial; etc.

The successful UJ experience with blended learning, like many successful practices at UJ, has found its way into a national plan for embedding online learning in higher education programs across the Jordanian Kingdom, being adopted and implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The ultimate goal is to have for each specialization a hybrid program: composed of full online courses (about 20%-25%), blended learning courses (about 60% or more), and face to face courses (the rest). Under the hybrid program, the students and the teachers will benefit from the three main modes of learning.

Regarding interdisciplinarity, it is a very important trend at universities across the globe. Of course, individual disciplines are significant in and of themselves. Many students at many universities throughout the world do study and specialize in single disciplines, not only at the master's and doctorate levels, but even as undergraduates. Nevertheless, studying two or more disciplines has

become a necessity as much new knowledge can emerge from hybridity and exposure to several disciplines at once. Multidisciplinarity also enhances employment opportunities.

In our part of the world, most of our institutions are exaggeratedly committed to single disciplines. In fact, when universities in our part of the world hire Ph.D. holders to teach, many of them still require eligible applicants to have obtained degrees in the same discipline in their bachelor's, master's and doctorates. Recently, we have introduced a number of multidisciplinary specializations. While some have proved to be very successful, others have been problematic as they are hosted or housed in single-discipline departments, which little know what to do with them.

By 2050, the hope is that multidisciplinary will be as common as single disciplinarity, so as to enable our students and scholars to benefit from the advantages that studies across disciplines yield.

The third pillar of a 2050 system of higher education must be further internationalization. Internationalization is a crucial venue or window to the world, enabling exchange of ideas as well as exchange of faculty members and students, in addition to collaboration on teaching/learning, research, and joint degrees.

From my experience, as a former Director of International Relations and dean at UJ, with the Bologna Process and with exchange programs with several key international universities in Europe, the Americas, and South-East Asia, I have seen the lives of so many students, faculty members, and researchers radically transform, in so many positive ways, as a result of capacity-building, mobility, and research grants. As for joint programs, which enable students and faculty members to greatly benefit, they remain a far-fetched dream. In the first decade after the year 2000, we at UJ tried to have joint graduate programs with several international partners, ones which constitute a win-win situation, but – due to some legislative hurdles and other logistics – we could not have them finalized, even though we came so close. Hopefully in thirty years, we have internationalization at these fronts and others become a reality.

This is the (humble) vision I have of HE in 2050, whose three pillars will be a benefit not only to our students, faculty members, and university community, but to all those with whom they engage freely and effectively across borders and across continents, in our small globe. And this is how we all benefit.