Ruth Kerr
From learning innovation to digital distance education

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FROM LEARNING INNOVATION TO DIGITAL DISTANCE EDUCATION

Higher education is currently challenged by a shifting demographic, declining public funding, the rapidly changing needs of the job market in a global knowledge society, questions of rising costs and affordability/value for students, as well as competition from new non-academic and for-profit players in the Higher education marketplace. In line with the platformization of society, narratives around Higher education, and its digital future, embrace disruption theory, the uberization of teaching, the Netflix effect on the Higher education (He) industry, alternative credentials, and the partial substitution of universities' role by tech giants. There is also an increased focus on preparing career-ready graduates for the 21st century workplace via the teaching of competencies and skills in in-demand areas and collaboration with industry. This review article looks at four recent works that try to respond to these challenges facing He. They propose diverse reflections on how to achieve an effective and resilient evolution of Higher education. Their strategies may vary but the direction is online, and all of them bring the narrative firmly back to the institution and system level, highlighting the intrinsic value of a formal university education, and the benefits of that education to the individual and society. This review provides a synthesis of key issues for the future of Higher education explored in all four of the books selected for review. It then summarizes the governance approaches and main issues explored in each one.

KEYWORDS *Learning Innovation; Digital Learning; Digital Governance; Moocs; Institutions.*

1. Introduction

In today's digital global knowledge society, the nature of work is changing and the demand for a more skilled workforce is increasing, leading to massive growth in the lifelong learner sector. Building enough bricks and mortar universities to satisfy demand would be impossible, especially since government funding of Higher education (He) in many countries has already reduced. But as university costs increase, the student/customers start to pose questions of affordability and value. Online solutions were already being

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developed, but the advent of Moocs and their subsequent growth provided a wake-up call for Higher education institutions (Heis) about the provision of scalable and sustainable education, and about the presence of new players in the market potentially offering alternative credentials and career-focused skills. Then, when the global pandemic struck, it not only focused attention on how best to serve students during the move to emergency remote teaching, but also on the hugely important role of the technology companies in the provision of digital education (from virtual classrooms to learning tools to proctoring) and related issues of privacy and student data. Some of the narratives around how Higher education should shape its future embrace disruption theory and predict an impact of digitalisation on the He industry that is similar to that experienced by the retail, cinema or travel industry, with unbundling of the different phases of provision and multiple players offering different choices. These are narratives that question the future of universities as we know them, with a high level of commercialisation within the He industry. Three recent books, however, offer a counter narrative. Although they are not new, they have been selected for this review because they all look to the future of education in a post-pandemic world, which still hasn't happened, and so this increases their temporal relevance. Separately and together, they make a comprehensive case for an effective and resilient evolution of Higher education that works at the level of system and institution to continue to provide quality research and quality education, highlighting the intrinsic value of a university degree and the benefits of a university education to the individual and to society in general. This review article looks at key issues in the future of Higher education that are explored by all three of the selected books and then highlights the differences in governance approaches and the main issues that are treated in each one.

2. Online and Oer

Online has been around for a long time as an ethical approach to education provision for underrepresented and non-school-leaver students (Ubell 2021). But the pandemic-prompted acceleration of online learning provision has put the spotlight on e-learning as a way forward for He and the growing body of lifelong learners. Online is proposed as the only accessible, sustainable and scalable alternative for continuing the university mission for quality and credentialed learning. And for reaching out to a broader and more international user-base. «Staying online» (Ubell 2021) is the title of one of the books selected for this review, but it could also be the title of this article because all the authors are looking at how, not if, university education will be delivered

online in the future. Although faculty were skeptical about the learning outcomes of online delivery in the early stages, and therefore hesitant about large-scale adoption, authors of all three volumes reference the massive amounts of research attesting that there is no significant difference between student performance in online and on-campus courses, which is leading to increased uptake (e.g., Kim and Maloney 2020, 31; Ubell 2021, 18-19). Described by Ubell as «the most myth-shattering advert for virtual learning» (116), Moocs are recognised by all four authors as playing a significant role in driving the advance of multimedia education, prompting experimental course design and delivery in the virtual environment, and the development of scalable solutions. Their significance as Oers, however, is hardly touched upon, while the importance of Oers to third mission education provision continues and was recently reiterated by Stephen Downes in relation to virtual reality, where, for example, production costs are so high that individual institutions would be unable to sustain them without commercial support (Downes 2022).

3. The centrality of the student

In a fast-changing digital society, the major question for He policymakers is how best to serve tech-savvy learners and how best to prepare them for an uncertain future. At the heart of the discourse in these three books about the future of Higher education is the notion that students will change through guided access to, and interaction with, the disciplinary knowledge in their chosen subject-area. The authors talk about the transformative power of education to «engage, enlighten and empower» (Nichols 2020) and about the student's relationship with knowledge: «The central focus of the university's activity is the development that takes place within the student, a development fuelled by encounters with knowledge» (Nichols 2020, 23). And the authors all make a solid case for formal education, delivered online, which is of value for the individual and for society. Education for these authors is not about job-ready graduates, or higher salaries, or being able to hold onto your job or achieve a promotion, even though these may be valuable side-effects of obtaining a degree. The core value of education is about gaining a new sense and understanding of self and the world, which then empowers graduates to make a difference in the world, and includes aspects like «social cohesion, human potential and self-actualisation» (Nichols 2020, 2). A similar idea was also expressed by Ashwin (2020): «it is the students' engagement with the specific disciplinary knowledge that changes the way they understand themselves and their world, and what they can do in the world» (70). However, Ashwin ma-

kes little or no reference to online education, whereas it is only through using digital education as the driver of future transformation that the centrality of the student in this sense can be preserved.

4. The centrality of the teacher

These three books reassert the importance of the role of faculty in curriculum and course design and in providing guided access to curricular content for the students. Teachers should know who they are teaching and what their students' previous learning is, to know how to guide students' interaction with the course content, and aid their understanding. But the teacher's own expert understanding of the disciplinary knowledge, and their relationship with it, is a key factor in education. Academics are not there simply to offer students opportunities to learn, but to select the most significant aspects of the disciplinary knowledge and guide students in their exploration of it. The implication is that this fundamental strategic importance of faculty should be enough to override initial faculty misgivings relating to transferring the face-to-face teaching experience to the online environment: their inexperience with the teaching tools; the fear that learning outcomes online will not be as good as in face-to-face learning environments and the doubts surrounding potential increases in cheating during assessment activities in the virtual classroom.

5. From isolated experiments to institutional and systems-wide transformation

Although at first glance the content of the three books may seem to have less to do with digital governance than with individual program design and teaching approach, the four authors all make a case for an institutionalized approach to digital learning. Isolated experiments are not enough to effect change, and online is not a « simple and costly add-on », but is a systematic and systemic process involving all stakeholders. Teamwork is at the core of this innovation. There is a need for administration and academics to work together to support the concept of the university itself.

> Across the globe online learning is a giant machine with many parts. In addition to well-trained digital instructors, expert instructional designers, savvy videographers, and skilled techies, operating an online enterprise requires a long and complex chain of other professionals in marketing and recruitment, remote

student support services, budget and finance, and dozens of other crafts that contribute to making the digital learning engine run (Ubell 2021, XV).

This raises the question of whether to go it alone or work with Opms. The short-term advantages of Opms for digital education provision are obvious, in terms of risk-management, investment and personnel costs for the user experience; the platform, course and data management, especially since Coursera and now edX have no membership fees. However, if courses are successful, the approx. 50% of course fees/certificate revenue that goes to the Opm can represent a significant loss for the institution over the years, without considering indirect losses in terms of reputation or positioning (Ubell 2021, 85).

Having briefly explored the macro areas of interest covered by the authors of the three books selected for review, the following section offers a more focused summary of the governance approach and main ideas proposed by the authors of each of the specific books.

6. Learning innovation and the future of higher education

In Learning Innovation and the future of Higher education, the authors, Kim and Maloney, make a strong case for the creation of a new interdisciplinary academic field called Learning Innovation. This field would offer scholarship as well as «training and credentials in subjects like instructional design, learning analytics, technology innovation» to train tomorrow's Higher education leaders to cope with the fast-changing and highly complex scenarios that He represents.

This is a period of «historic shift» in education, according to the authors, where «educational technologies, inclusive pedagogy, global networks and ubiquitous access to information» have led to a rethink about how best to help today's students learn, and to «new expectations about developing skills for lifelong learning and professional adaptability». The authors provide solid evidence of «a turn to learning» that is taking place in Us schools like Boston, Cse Channel Islands and Davidson College (Kim and Maloney 2020, 67-77), as well as their own institutions, Dartmouth and Georgetown, via special Centers for learning and teaching and/or learning innovation (Ctls).

A move towards constructivist, student-centered active learning had been silently underway for some time, driven by advances in Learning Sciences, but this was boosted by the widespread institutional adoption of Lmss and the resulting increase in the online offer. And was heightened by the explosion of Moocs, which «forced Higher education to debate the wisdom of joining

the Mooc movement or not» and to «confront the challenge of disruption» (Kim and Maloney 2020, 32). This led to the birth of Centers and Incubators, where small-scale EdTech experiments in online course design and delivery, informed by learning data and evidence-based practice, gradually translated into cross-institutional collaborations that impacted on everyday teaching and learning activity. Leading the authors to now describe Ctls as «part of a structured process of organizational change to encourage and manage innovation» (Kim and Maloney 2020, 76).

Ctls employ a range of learning professionals with a varied skill set: EdTech professionals, instructional designers and learning analytics specialists, graphic designers and digital marketing staff partner with more traditional campus educators and leaders (Kim and Maloney 2020, 61) to develop new learning initiatives. It is in these Ctls, argue the authors, that the administration/academic divide is broken down and that an ecosystem of learning innovation within the institution starts. It is now important to transform the Centers from solely support units into something more (Kim and Maloney 2020, 11).

These Ctls attest to a «vibrant, energized and mission-driven community» (Kim and Maloney 2020, 122) of innovators in He. But, the authors state, current discourse around innovation often takes place in professional associations and consortia, conferences, networks eg Educause, Olc, Coursera, and knowledge exchange happens on Twitter, which, the authors point out, is instant and extensive but brief, ephemeral, not-indexed, fragile and not peer-reviewed. The conversations happen between EdTech professionals and academic practitioners, but, for the authors, the lack of scholars of Higher education in these conversations is an issue. They feel that, «as learning innovation initiatives continue to grow, our understanding of what these initiatives mean for the He system remains opaque» (Kim and Maloney 2020, 113). «Achieving a deep understanding of the drivers and inhibitors of a postsecondary turn to learning requires space to develop and explore ideas, share outcomes and data, and analyze meaning» (Kim and Maloney 2020, 113).

The book is based on personal experience on the Masters in Learning and Technology at the Georgia Tech Center for Learning Innovation and «rehearsal and development of ideas with their community of peers» (19). The authors suggest that the «dizzying pace of innovation» (10) in learning across He has outpaced the professional – and they argue – scholarly foundations that support and inform this work. Which is one of the main reasons why the authors propose that we view learning innovation not only as a current practice but also as an emerging disciplinary field that deserves its own academic home, its own scholars and scholarship, and new career paths for non-faculty members. But their story about «improving the ability of learners

to learn» is «a long-run upgrading of human capital that is hard to measure in the short-term» (51). And their contention is «a research question not an affirmation» (51).

7. Staying online

The Rapid Transition to online in 2019 has to count «as one of the most unimaginable and exceptional feats ever accomplished in He» (Ubell 2021, 3) and Robert Ubell's collection of perspectives in Staying Online explore how universities can use what they learned from the move to emergency remote teaching during the pandemic to place digital learning firmly at the heart of their core business.

Ubell reminds us that online learning is an ethical practice. As the economic gap between rich and poor widens, the historic role that He has played in bridging the divide is more important now than ever (Picketty 2017 quoted in Ubell 2021, 34). Online education, since its invention, has permitted millions of underrepresented and working students – online students are likely to be female, older and poorer than on-campus counterparts – to gain a college degree and «leap over the class divide» (Ubell 2021, 32). Labor Department trends show that increased demand for new skills in the workplace, and the higher positions and salaries that degrees command, are fuelling a move towards online study amongst workers with a high school diploma. But Ubell also reminds us that other studies have shown that «college completion correlates with other more subtle, psychological and personal effects – deeper self-worth, better health and, not least, greater personal satisfaction» (quoting Faber 2020 in Ubell 2021, 40).

Ubell also stresses that online is an economic practice. The tuition fees from online students can make the difference between survival and closure in the current context of reduced enrollments at local level, opening up courses to a much broader user base anywhere in the world. Online is a more convenient and flexible option for students, and they save on living expenses, but tuition fees are not low, so how to convince online students they are getting a good deal? How to recruit and maintain online learners? Ubell advances practical solutions based also on his own experience.

Faculty hesitation about the value of online learning has largely been quashed by experience and by the large body of comparative research that demonstrates there is no substantial difference in student learning outcomes between online and on-campus learning. And faculty unpreparedness for teaching online as the pandemic struck in 2020, in terms of both tools and

techniques, is also being addressed at an individual and institutional level via literature, professional associations, and a proliferation of online guides and courses in online teaching. As Ubell says «there is an increased awareness of the impossibility of simply transferring on-campus practices to the virtual environment» and points out that institutions must make «serious investments to achieve the right balance of high-performance learning technologies with astute virtual pedagogy, aiming to satisfy heightened and more knowing online students» (Ubell 2021, 60).

There are other ways of convincing online learners to sign up and stay that go beyond classroom practice however. Ubell suggests that making a university degree more affordable would increase enrolment rates. Discounts could be offered to online students via donations and cites some successful examples e.g., St John's University; Nyu medical School who can enroll medical students for free thanks to fundraising; Johns Hopkins University and the $1.3 billion donation from Michael Bloomberg (Ubell 2021, 65) and also via differential pricing, e.g. the University of Pennsylvania's online degree in applied arts and sciences, where virtual tuition costs approximately $1000 less per credit (Ubell 2021, 66). Delaying and renegotiating the key provisions of the gainful employment rule to make sure that repayment of student debt is doable is also important. Once students are enrolled, it is important that they complete their program. Recruitment companies tend to be successful at getting students to enroll on courses, but rates of abandonment, even in the early stages of study, can be very high. Ubell suggests making the recruitment companies responsible for retaining students throughout their degree cycle to encourage them to see learners as students, not customers. A third practical solution offered by Ubell, and one which he emphasizes, is the need to make online students feel more valued by improving the level of non-teaching services they are offered. This includes tutoring, health, counseling, entertainment, transport as well as usual administrative services, which are preferably available via the one app like that used by Asu (Ubell 2021, 122). Today's digital-savvy students are used to convenience and this is what they expect and need from their digital university experience too (Ubell 2021, 121). «We owe our students convenience for the respect it represents, the sanity it embraces and the kindness it demonstrates» (Ubell 2021, 123) and it may well be a key to the future survival of universities, according to Ubell.

8. Transforming universities with digital distance education

If the previous authors highlight the importance of digital education to the future of He, Mark Nichols in Transforming Universities with Digital Distance Education goes a step further. The foundation of his thesis is that demand for a university education is forecast to increase, and that current forms of delivery cannot respond to this demand without serious compromise for students or public funding. Digital distance education is the only key to providing an education that is accessible, scalable and personalized, and one that is shaped to the interests of both society (because publicly-funded graduates participate in the economy and community) and of students (because the university learning experience offers them the opportunity to be «engaged, enlightened and empowered»). Nichols is surprised that the on-campus, lecture format education has survived so long in today's digital society and feels that it is only a question of time before today's 21st century learners request the kind of personal client-based service that digitally-empowered consumers expect: flexible start dates for course and modules; flexible study times to accommodate work family etc.; learning support; seamless and consistent services across departments; digital services accessible on all devices. Nichols emphasizes, however, that to guarantee this kind of response, what is needed is not digital learning but a digital distance education system, «one that provides an education, not only learning opportunities» (Nichols 2020, 7). One that not only takes university away from physical campuses to a totally virtual environment, but provides an effective digital and collaborative approach.

Nichols admits that the Higher education industry is a complex one and therefore difficult to transform. This is because universities have conflicting roles: they simultaneously serve private interests (e.g., to offer more degrees in subjects of interest), they serve public interests (e.g., to provide more qualifications and more employable graduates) and they are also economic entities (e.g., they are under pressure to reduce the staff to student ratio or research spending) (Nichols 2020, 9).

If universities can be defined as «a system of interrelated academic and administrative activity with the main objective of providing quality education, supported by or alongside research, in compliance with the standards of regulating agencies» (Nichols 2020, 20), then the digital transformation of He will require a systems approach too. However, Nichols does feel a scalable and personalized approach is achievable without compromising quality compliance or academic standing. It will be necessary to make sure that «operating factors such as resource allocation, quality assurance, support systems and the

teaching role» are all carefully aligned. There will need to be new models for how the different elements within a university work together for the students' benefit, including better merging of administration and teaching activity. But transformation has to happen from the core, at the macro (university-wide), meso (course) and micro (module) level, because all learning activities become digital, and these digital activities replace materials and content, all tutoring is online and data analytics are integrated across all functions. The courses are non-semesterised, though structured, and offer the flexibility that today's learners want and need.

Digital distance education transcends technology enhanced learning (Tel). All its components are highly interdependent, and the key is scalability and personalization. The scale of institutional shift required to achieve Digital distance education in an established university takes senior level commitment, major investment, and a clear vision, according to Nichols, but transformation in this sense is the best way to serve the needs of 21st century students while addressing the economic challenges facing both universities and students.

9. Conclusions

A reading of these three books is recommended to provide theoretical insight, as well as some practical examples, of how to effect the organizational changes that He institutions will need to make if they want to successfully address, or even survive, the huge challenges currently facing them, including demographic, economic and societal issues. The authors of the three books may play down the reality of degree costs and student loan debt in countries like the Us and Uk, but they make a strong case for the value to society, as well as to the individual, of a quality, university education. They explore how to maintain its relevance for 21st century learners, and key concepts they propose are sustainability, scalability and personalization of learning and student services. The direction is digital, whether in hybrid or fully online mode, and the emphasis is on learning innovation that can be achieved through close collaboration between administration, teaching faculty and new academic figures in course design and delivery, like instructional designers and learning technologists.

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