Global Urban Challenges: The Role of Research Universities

Will Technology Save or Sink Higher Ed?

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Millions of students all over the world are surfing the internet and reaching out through social media to figure out where they want to study — and who they want to study with. They have lots of choices and lots of money, and their sheer numbers, not to mention their likes and dislikes, will surely impact the Higher Ed market in ways both predictable and surprising.

This wave of digital natives is already breaking on the shores of the US — and Canada, Australia, the UK, and others: the OECD reported that 4.3 million students studied outside their home countries in 2011 (vs 1.3 million twenty years earlier in 1990).

Indeed, just this week, the Institute for International Education (IIE) released its annual Open Doors report showing that the number of international students at colleges and universities in the US during academic year 2012-2013 rose by 7% (55,000) to a record high of 819,644.

US institutions that actively recruit and effectively support non-US students will find their efforts rewarded: they will diversify their student bodies, develop new revenue streams, and grow a global alumni network

— especially useful as domestic students increasingly look outside the US for opportunities.

But on campus learning is not the only way for the US Higher Ed sector to connect with this market, and some of the most innovative and most potentially "game changing" developments in education are being midwifed by for-profit enterprises and championed by VC funded incubators like 1776, Pearson, Techstars, and VentureBoard.

In this commentary I will stay focused on the Higher Ed (tertiary) sector, but just as reminder, private investments in the K-12 sector are, controversially in some cases, reshaping that landscape as well. And the pace of change in the education sector as a whole will only accelerate as disruptive technologies continue to be developed at a rapid rate.

Just a few weeks ago, tech incubator 1776 announced a global competition taking place from October 2013 through March 2014 called the Challenger Cup that seeks to identify promising startups addressing challenges in education, energy, health care, and government/Smart Cities. The winner will receive a $150,000 investment, with $650,000 in total "prize money" at stake.

The fact is, we are only at the start of a new age of digitally-enabled teaching and learning, as new technologies and new approaches will be constantly developed, tested, and scaled up as long as funding continues to be available. And so far, the money flow is in fact growing exponentially: Jake New reported for the October 4, 2013, *Chronicle of Higher Education* that investment in education technology grew from $146 million in 2002 to $429 million in 2011 and, incredibly, $1.1 billion in 2012.

Critics of the MOOCs (massive open online courses) argue that the technology will, disastrously, be used to replace education as we know it, rather than enhance the educational experience for students. They predict a deepened global social class divide, with wealthier students benefiting from "traditional" on campus immersion and the masses being left with an inferior, digitally mediated "training" experience. Within the US, the crisis in Higher Ed is already transforming domestic student

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choices and behavior. Our colleges and universities are being transformed, for better and for worse, and whether the increased utilization of digitally enabled courses will help or hurt students remains to be seen.

Be that as it may, the dropout rate for pure MOOCs is very high, and it didn't take long for educators, including even those committed to using new technology in their courses, to point out what everyone knew all along: that most students need some structure in order to complete what they begin. But we are just at the start of an iterative process, and the next generation of tech-enabled learning opportunities is already emerging.

Most of the "masses" around the world are likely to welcome any educational outreach at all, so at this point, it seems logical to focus on how new education technology is helping to expand the market for Higher Ed. In fact, it seems certain that MOOCs and next generation digital platforms will serve to advertise strong institutions and top faculty globally, and strengthen their position in the marketplace for faculty and students.

For example, in Beijing one leading university recently started convening groups of young faculty and graduate students to watch and discuss Harvard professor Michael Sandel's *Justice* course in advance of Professor Sandel's upcoming lecture on their campus. Faculty report that the conversations are exciting and really intellectually stimulating — just the sort of effect we'd expect!

Many schools are experimenting with hybrid courses that combine online lectures with classroom problem sets, projects, and group work. Of course, these new teaching strategies will require faculty and students to change their habits — and we all know change is hard. Professors will need to morph from all-knowing performers to engaged coaches, and students will need to take much more responsibility for their learning experience since it will not suffice to show up for a class of problem sets without having seen/heard the lecture or done the reading. Not everyone will happily immerse themselves in this brave new world, but nearly all institutions will surely explore how to incorporate digitally enhanced teaching.

We can expect to see MOOC-type platforms that include peer interaction and online tutoring, as well as "high touch" online teaching programs such as the playfully named TOQUES (rhymes with MOOCs): Teaching Online Qualified Engaged Students.

So, in summary, we have a growing army of entrepreneurs seeking to make money and transform the way we do teaching and learning. And we have hidebound and/or debt ridden US Higher Ed institutions that are ripe for disruption. What we don't have — notwithstanding decades of white papers and commissions — is a national strategy for US Higher Ed institutions to compete in the 21st century global marketplace.

It may just be that it's not in our constitutional DNA to implement a coherent plan for our Higher Ed sector. But I wonder: past generations found ways to come together to develop this extraordinary legacy asset…is it really the case that we can't take some of the obvious steps to enhance our competitiveness and ensure that we remain the destination of choice for the next generation of top teachers and students?

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