"Futurology" and Higher Education in the Post-COVID-19 Environment

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Abstract
Even before COVID-19, futurologists maintained that a number of disruptions to higher education were combining to create cataclysmic scenarios for universities. These claims inform an increasingly dominant policy and management discourse about the need for rapid and radical transformations in academic conventions, business models, and working practices. However, what is needed are evidence-based and iterative approaches to imagining the future, drawing on universities' own experiments with new forms of higher education.

There is nothing like a good crisis to excite ideas about different futures and new beginnings. At the very least, right now we are told that there will be a "new normal" and no return to the way things were before COVID-19. However, even before the pandemic, there were plenty of futurologists—especially in English-speaking nations—declaring a series of cataclysmic scenarios for higher education in which various factors combine to challenge and disrupt traditional academic conventions, business models, and working practices in public universities. Some speculate that these transformations may come to threaten the very foundations of higher education, its economic value, and its role in society.

These scenarios usually feature some combination of the following so-called "disruptors": the transformation of graduate employment; raised student expectations; a technology revolution including the widespread use of online learning, data analytics, and artificial intelligence; expansion and public financing constraints; policy turbulence; and growing global competition, particularly from private for-profit institutions and universities from emerging nations. To this mix, the cutting edge futurologist now adds the accelerating impact of COVID-19 and summons up its anxieties.

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The Futurologists' Discourse

Futurologists—often management consultants, "thought leaders," and journalists—predict that the future will bring rapid and continuous change, challenge, and uncertainty for those who manage and work in universities. In response, these managers and staff will need to fundamentally transform themselves in order to adapt to these new conditions and demands. In particular, the academic "workforce" of the future will have to be more "agile" and "flexible," more "professionalized," and subject to greater "specialization." One scenario from Ernst and Young even predicts that academics will largely become freelance workers operating across several higher education institutions (HEIs) and knowledge businesses.

So, it is argued, the conservativism, "silo mentality," resistance to interdisciplinarity and practical knowledge, sentimentality about "low-value" courses and, of course, the inherently glacial pace of change in public universities must be overcome. The legacy higher education "workforce" will have to be dismantled. Fortuitously, so the argument goes, amid the global pandemic and its upending of lives, communities, and institutions, these essential transformations will be expedited.

A Flawed Methodology

These self-appointed experts on higher education largely draw on interviews and surveys of university heads, senior policy makers, and key stakeholders such as business leaders and graduate employers. They rarely seek the views of staff or students working and studying in HEIs, let alone consult the existing academic research on developments and trends within higher education systems throughout the world. Nevertheless, this futurology circulates among influential networks and begins to inform current strategy making within institutions and policy making at state, national, and global levels. So, it should not simply be dismissed as speculative marketing, but evaluated as a discourse with influence and material impact on behavior and decision-making.

Cataclysmic futurology caricatures existing models of public higher education. Universities are said to be traditional, "twentieth-century" institutions that are academic-orientated rather than student- or customer-focused. They are also characterized as too similar to each other and dominated by an ageing academic workforce that is reluctant to change. The futurologists almost exclusively cite previous management consultancy reports, policy documents, and newspaper articles. They recycle myths and folklore that have become all too familiar as a result, but frankly, do not stand up to empirical scrutiny.

Academic Work by Evidence

One area in which evidence is mostly lacking concerns the actual work that people do inside universities. Futurologists ignore much of the existing research evidence about academic work. For example, they assume the academic profession is still largely homogenous and the vast majority of academics are in permanent positions, undertaking both teaching and research. The evidence suggests otherwise. There is burgeoning research literature on the diversification of the academic "profession," the wide range of entrants (including from other professions), the different career paths that they take, and the erosion of the linear academic career. Further, part-time, fixed-term, contingent, teaching-only, and nontenure track faculty have grown significantly in the United Kingdom, Australia, and United States in recent years.

An Evidence-Based Approach to Looking Ahead

In contrast to these accounts, we should start with an accurate analysis of the present, based on the best current research evidence and analysis of trends in the recent, mid-, and long-term past. This must include rigorous analysis of existing examples of effective and successful practice that could offer embryonic illustrations of developments for the future. The European Union-sponsored "Universities of the Future" program and the University of Lincoln's 21st Century Lab are two examples.

More evidence-based and iterative approaches to imagining the future can ensure that we evaluate the full range of factors influencing current trends, including sociocultural, political, and environmental (and even quasilegal) factors, as well as economic and technological factors. We can then avoid reductionist approaches that privilege particular activities and deterministic assumptions that prioritize specific outcomes.

Is the Pandemic the Ultimate Disrupter?

So, is the pandemic the ultimate disrupter? It is certainly providing plenty of grist for the futurologists' mill. We are told that "these are unprecedented times" and, indeed, it is rare for the higher education sector as a whole to contract, and for so many individual universities to be downsizing. However, there have been disruptions before—wars, including civil wars, nationalist movements, invasions, mass migrations, all of which have seriously impacted on universities in various parts of the world. There have been retrenchments in the past: Following the financial crisis of 2008–2009, there was contraction in many national HE systems, with staff moving to shorter working weeks and taking pay cuts, and voluntary and compulsory redundancy schemes, in exchange for the job security of the majority who remained.

We are also told that "there will be no return to the old normal," but most universities are currently concerned with short- to medium-term survival and not altering their business models and *modus operandi* too much, for fear of collapse. A crisis is not a good time to start making a new strategy, even though the old strategy is probably in

tatters. When universities had the money to innovate, they felt that they did not need to; but now when they do need to renew their activities, they do not have the funds to invest in managing the necessary change.

None of this is good for management consultants, of course, who will suffer as a result of the contraction in universities' finances. So, maybe it is time for universities to take charge of their own futures. ◢

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