6

In Praise of Incremental Innovation in Higher Education

Carlos Iván Moreno

Abstract

Disruption seems to be the new name of the game in higher education. As everything has to be "disruptive" in order to be valuable, we risk losing sight of the importance of traditional incremental innovation, especially in macrouniversities. There is no doubt that higher education institutions around the globe have to continually change and adapt but is it really possible, or even desirable, for all institutions to adopt a disruptive approach?

A few months ago, at an international conference, a fellow panelist—and president of a small and innovative university—claimed that "innovation is not enough for universities anymore, they have to be disruptive to survive." Increasingly, international conferences on higher education are dominated by the hype of disruption. Sounds good. But is it really plausible? What is wrong with traditional, incremental innovation?

Over the past decades, innovation has become a mantra in higher education. It has been recited for years by scholars and organizations alike, stressing that, if absent, universities will fail to meet the demands for quality and equity. Innovation and quality are intertwined concepts, and especially in the postpandemic age, universities around the globe are confronted with the necessity to change and adapt. It is unarguable that innovation of pedagogical approaches, modes of delivery, and flexibility are essential to counter the effects of the dramatic transformation driven by the forces of globalization, technological advancements, and changing student needs and expectations.

In a Brave New World, Is Incremental Innovation Not Good Enough?
The pressure for universities to adapt and change has intensified as they have to educate students with diverse aims and needs. In addition to the challenges that have forced universities to innovate in the past, new forces arise and whose effect upon higher education promises to be profound. One of these forces is the increasing popularity of e-learning providers, short courses and microcredentials (competency-based certification that demonstrate mastery in a particular area), as they provide learners and potential employees with a wealth of knowledge in a specific field, and in a shorter period of time, compared to traditional and formal higher education programs.

For example, from 2011 to 2021, the number of students enrolled in massive open online courses (MOOC) globally grew from 300,000 to 220 million. In Mexico, there are currently 5.7 million learners enrolled in an online course at Coursera; this is more than the formal enrollment in higher education, which reached five million. This evidence suggests the tremendous market value that e-learning has gained, but more importantly, the need for traditional models of delivering higher education to evolve in order to provide more flexible learning experiences.

The impact of automation on the future of jobs adds to the forces that place great pressure upon universities. It is estimated that 30 percent to 60 percent of the professional

activities can be automated, and that 65 percent of the population currently age 12 or less will perform tasks that do not even exists yet. Universities, especially in Latin America, will have to create new undergraduate and graduate programs to provide students with the opportunity to thrive in the coming future. Curricular innovation will have to include programs related, among other things, to generative artificial intelligence, the internet of things, cybersecurity, city sciences or biotechnology.

Furthermore, addressing the evolving educational landscape will require a pedagogical transformation of traditional lectures. As noted in a 2021 survey administered by the Inter-American Development Bank, higher education institutions in the region know that "hybrid" and online learning will be critical to the future. According to this study, up to 80 percent of faculty members agreed that the adoption of a hybrid learning model in higher education is irreversible. Students think the same way: only 29 percent think that their educational program should be delivered only or mostly in-person. Moreover, innovation in higher education needs to reflect an interdisciplinary approach and the practical application of what is learnt in the classroom to solve social problems.

I argue that these and other *external* disruptive forces should be addressed in existing universities by traditional and incremental innovation approaches, not by a narrative of *internal* organizational disruption.

Innovate, Do Not Disrupt
If in the past universities lived under the mantra of innovation, they now seem to live under the tyranny of disruption. To address some of the aforementioned challenges, traditional universities need to continue innovating, incrementally and carefully, not falling prey to the disruptive fad. For the sake of clarity and the correct use of language, let us remember that innovation refers "to something new or to a change made to an existing product, idea, or field" (Merriam-Webster), while *disruptive* means "causing trouble and therefore stopping something from continuing as usual" or "tending to damage the orderly control of a situation" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Regardless of universities' mission, size, or their institutional model, demographic, social and technological forces exert a great deal of pressure upon universities to change and "to improve products and ideas," to innovate. However, universities should be very careful when attempting to "damage the orderly control of a situation" by being disruptive. As much as we praise change, we also need to value universities' stability. There is one harsh—and obvious—truth: without organizational stability a university cannot innovate, let alone be disruptive.

Context and size matter. Institutions like the National Autonomous University of Mexico, with a student population of 373,000 and 42,000 faculty members, or the University of Guadalajara with 329,000 students and around 18,000 faculty members, and many other macrouniversities in Latin America find themselves at a complex balance between stability and change. They could not be disruptive without destabilizing their internal governance. Instead, macrouniversities have to innovate incrementally, promoting a series of small—preferably structural—improvements and nondisruptive changes in their teaching methodologies, educational delivery models, and organizational structures.

Unlike disruptive innovations, which create entirely new paradigms often introduced by new players, incremental innovation builds upon existing foundations, enhancing its efficiency and effectiveness, while maintaining stability. There is no doubt that continuing innovation is key to the long-term relevance of universities, but to claim that "success" relies solely upon their capacity to be disruptive is misleading. Incremental innovation is not only beneficial, but may be the only path for change at established universities.

Be Suspicious
University executives and "management gurus" alike should embrace incremental innovation, especially when steering institutions in the right direction. As scholars of higher education, we should be suspicious of those for whom the only way to improve universities is to disrupt them. Let us not forget that, while MOOC providers are in the business of *training*, universities are in the business of *comprehensive education*, and have been so for a millennium already.

If in the past universities lived under the mantra of innovation, they now seem to live under the tyranny of disruption.

Carlos Iván Moreno is professor of public policy and higher education and dean of the Online University System, University of Guadalajara, Mexico. E-mail: ivan.moreno@academicos.udg.mx.

*X: @carlosivanmoren
Threads: @carlosivan.ma*

I agree with Lawrence Summers, president emeritus of Harvard University, who warned of the calls for rapid change in higher education, since "not all that universities do needs to change," nor does it have to be fast adapting to the newest productivity fad. To improve higher education, it is important to demystify the narrative of disruption.

◤