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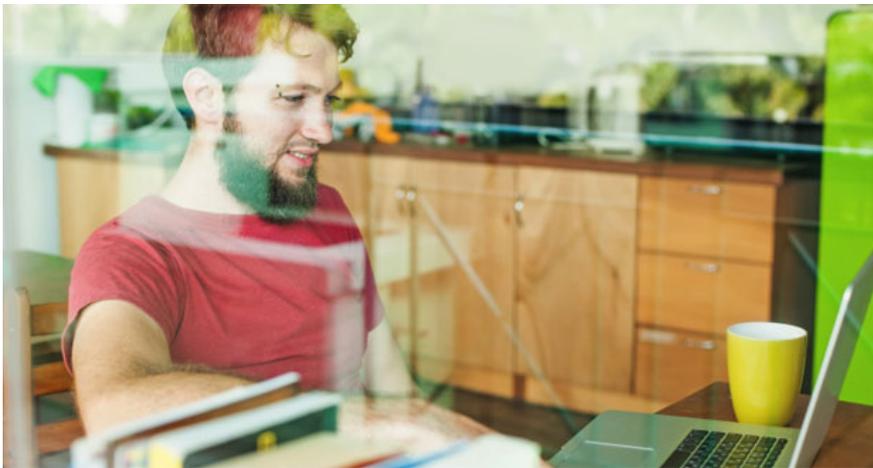
Opinion: Higher-ed disruption handing control to consumers

👤 By: Michael Hewitt-Gleeson   🗀 in Policy & Reform, Top Stories   🕓 November 16, 2015   💬 2 Comments

Digital disruption hits traditional universities hard but good changes should outweigh bad.
By Michael Hewitt-Gleeson

At an accelerating rate, digital disruption has been undermining many of our traditional institutions and industries, such as banking and finance, music, transport, broadcasting, science and even dating.

Every day, we are witnessing the digital world as a virtual destroyer of any traditional enterprise that relies on the sale of information and is slow to adapt.

In the past, the internet destroyed the livelihoods of traditional stockbrokers, giving everyone access to the proprietary information they used to sell.

Prior to the Wall Street meltdown, it seemed absurd to think that financial institutions such as Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers could disappear overnight.

Soon you will see the same thing happen to some universities. Those education providers that are slow to embrace the inevitable shift towards digital solutions risk facing a Humpty Dumpty scenario, where they are left putting themselves back together again after they have fallen.

We've already seen the way the internet has opened up accessibility to information and minimised the need for a professor to be the centre of knowledge, but what is shaking the foundations of traditional universities today is that technology will disrupt both the nature of the service a university provides and its basic product – the degree.

Since Plato, Aristotle and Socrates 2500 years ago, the traditional view of education is that learning takes place in the classroom and as a result, most universities and providers of higher learning practice this model. However, today's digital view shows that learning takes place in the student's brain.

The brain, which itself is a deeply digital environment, can be wired anywhere, anytime and in any place.

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Technology caters to this flexible place of learning and it will enhance the customisation of study at the individual level.

The education experience will move away from traditional linear approaches towards more tailored pathways, reflecting what works for the student rather than the other way around.

At the heart of how digital disruption is affecting Australian universities is the shift it is causing in the relationship between education providers and students.

Power is moving away from traditional university services and selective university admissions officers into the hands of educational consumers, who will soon have their choice of attending universities across the world online whilst they're on public transport.

If top universities around the world are slow to evolve, smaller and more flexible players are likely to emerge from the pack and gain a greater share of mind and market.

The changes ahead will ultimately bring about the most beneficial, efficient and equitable access to education the world has ever seen.

Greater advances in technology will offer future students an array of new choices for how they build and customise their education.

Bespoke degrees will emerge and students will be able to put them together according to what they need.

Being able to study what and where you want will encourage more people to study, leading to a more educated population and benefits like those regional areas have gained from online learning.

Digital aggregators who are not only education providers but also link students to employers will benefit from playing an even larger role in the market.

Through these providers, students will be able to demonstrate that they either have, or will have, a set of competencies customised for the desired employer's unique needs.

As a result, the relationship between employers and students will be strengthened and students will find the transition to employment less troubling.

Like many other components of the university experience, pricing structures will also need to adapt to the changing circumstances.

One of the side effects from the changing nature of education is that people will no longer pay tens of thousands of dollars for degrees as accessibility grows and information becomes more readily available for free online.

To understand why disruption has recently become such a common term across all industries, we should consider the thinking behind existing practices.

For a very long time, Western education has taught students to debate and defend their viewpoints, rather than try to escape their current logic and look for better or alternative views.

Learning to defensively trap yourself in a box instead of taking an innovative leap out has left many decision-makers of today trapped in irrational logic across all facets of life. We see examples in business, education and politics. Defending traditional truths has left many industries vulnerable to disruption, which is ignited by those who dare to think outside the box.

Universities are no different. If they hold onto such slow thinking, it could mean defeat.

Innovation does come with a cost. Whilst digital disruption will lead to many new and exciting education solutions, we will also lose several valuable experiences.

Aspects such as university socialisation will change, whilst others, like long chats in the dining hall, the feeling of collegiality, academic parades of people dressed-up in colourful gowns and debates around the seminar table, will probably slowly fade.

One more thing that will decline is the number of faculties needed to educate the world's students, because most of the teaching work will be able to be automated and demand for instructors will decline. The role of teaching itself will evolve, as students begin to use their time with professors in a more interactive way.

Fair or unfair, if our goal is educating as many students as possible, as affordably as possible, then the evolution of the university from campus to smartphone is a liberation for civilisation and not a letdown.

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Rob Day
November 16, 2015 at 2:46 pm

These conclusions have been mostly stripped of the evidence and logic that would support them. How much of these predictions is solidly based? How much is a guess?
What Universities sell consumers is twofold – a learning environment and an esteemed qualification. To take the second part first, online tests for qualifications are subject to identity fraud. If you cannot guarantee who actually earned the qualification, it loses any esteem. This is not a simple problem for technology to solve. Telstra employees tried for years to build an electronic voting system that could guarantee the identity of the voter, and failed. Human ingenuity to disrupt the test validity should not be underestimated. My opinion is that progress in digital education will be rapid only if we solve this wicked problem.
Now for the learning experience. Yes, you learn when you are inspired and interested, not when you are herded into a classroom. But understanding is more than knowing facts, and it is people that inspire you. Sometimes that can be done digitally, but some things require real experiences. There is nothing like touching a real animal to get interested in it, whether it be a wallaby, a snake or a fish. And having others around that are inspired by learning too is a wonderful gift to boost the learning process. My opinion is that if campuses can provide inspirational places and people to foster renowned learning environments, they will remain magnets for the students who want the best education.

Reply

Nathan
November 17, 2015 at 9:52 am

After returning to University to work in the midst of this new digital frontier and the massifcation of education a few things have struck me. IT Technology is no longer frightening and much like the introduction of the car, ATMS, the telephone we are confortable using it, but at the same time the ease of use people are becoming more unaware of how the car actually works and can not problem solve without an mechanic/IT guru/software or system aware person both for students and staff. Technology will still need some form of human to ask for help, to prepare, submit and trouble shoot (most likely lowly paid call centre staff without IT training or degrees or diploma). The next thing is that the massification of education in Australia at least has put immense strain on Lecturers passing and or advising and helping some people improve who lack a range of basic skills from using Word and the IT infrasturcture, basic digita informationl literacy with finding appropriate resources and most importantly critical abilities to decide if something is a worthwhile supporting article for their argument or untested web opinion. Writing and constructing an argument or new idea is also a skill that most students lack as our society actually moves away from a critical and argumentive post 1960s western tradtional to a rote learning confucious and neo-con western tradition. The last bone to pick is that in my humble opinion some disciplines teach facts and you regurgitate them, but in the western tradition (which stretches back supposedly to Classical Greecs but really starts gaining ground in the Enlightment onwards) has emphasised proposing an idea or argument, testing it and supporting it and then publishing it for others to critiques across the sciences including the social sciences, yes there is an emphasis on defending your argument but there is also an emphasis on proving or disproving an idea be it established or not. This is what has driven the west for the last 200 years past the other areas of the world and this idea has permeated right outwards in Australia's case to the most disenfrancihised form the intellectual tradition.

Reply

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