

A Call for Agile Adaptation

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Bio

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Uncertain present, optimistic future

Long before the COVID-19 sanitary crisis, education innovators stated the need for a shift for higher education, they had a strong conviction that universities needed an urgent transformation. Before the pandemic, the echo was slow, and the collective discussion was embraced by only a few adventurous that followed along. The pandemic was ironically the best opportunity for the much-needed change in education (Macken, et al. 2021). It was after the lockdown that the existing challenges in higher education grew and became more evident. Failure to provide meaningful learning experiences, long boring lectures, and lack of innovation are some of the problems that were evident in most higher education institutions. University leaders cannot be playing for the schools of now (Dennis, 2021).

Faculty members that had a shortage of teaching skills, active learning design, and meaningful connections with their students, had an amplified version of themselves when moved online. On the contrary, educators who are resourceful, creative, and understand their role in education, thrived during online learning, and are now willing to maintain this new modality if needed.

The pandemic has pinned the importance of professional development in higher education. Now more than ever, faculty members need to experience constant reflection and mental challenges that allow them to build and re-build new relationship models with the education process. Thanks to the drastic modality transformation after de pandemic, HE faculty was forced to move to online environments quickly. In that shift, educators rapidly learned new tools and had the humility to recognize that new methods needed to be incorporated to be successful. Lectures were no longer enough. The world witnesses the fastest and more agile demonstration of change. Education, in general, evolved more in a year than in the past 10 years combined. Students were experimenting with online laboratories and simulators, HE faculty was integrating collaborating

tools with students from other universities around the world. New and novel experiences filled the virtual classroom with experiences and change. With the strong conviction that online learning will not replace face-to-face education, this is not a discussion about the best modality, but the demonstration that change is possible, and the new reality should combine the best of many worlds yet to be discovered.

The true ambassadors of change are both faculty members and leaders. Both positions hold the true responsibility to maintain or discard innovations brought by the pandemic online and hybrid experiences. Now that we are moving to more hybrid environments, some higher education institutions have the feeling that these changes are only part of a contingency plan due to the pandemic crisis. However, a big mistake is to think that online modalities or a combination of the models will not have a primary role in our future (Recio & Colella, 2021). Responsibility for a clear vision of the new role of technologies in education relies on academic leaders. Who are called to plan according to the evolution accelerated by COVID-19.

Ironically, true innovation will not be a consequence exclusively of technology, but of the use, people give these technologies. Important investments have been done to equip classrooms for hybrid learning. This equipment has been carefully selected to maintain a connection to education regardless of the place. If universities have the idea that this transition will have an expiration date, we are mistaken. This transition will be a permanent state for HE. The process to re-think, re-build and re-design education will become new normality for education. The need for constant calibration of the new ecosystem must be part of our strategic planning and development.

Having units that facilitate change bring a positive impact on the transition. Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ), Ecuador founded SHIFT Academy in 2018, with the vision to innovate higher education for the new era. Having this unit during the pandemic was key for the adaptation of the dramatic changes HE suffered. SHIFT Academy was the protagonist in the training, support, mentoring, and envisioning the new changes to come. In 2021, throughout the planning for a possible return to campus, SHIFT Academy was responsible for the design of the new hybrid learning experience. From the classroom preparation, equipment, to training and learning platforms, this unit supported the institution for the future. The role of these units of innovation is key for the university of the future.

Key values for the future

The vision for the future, although still uncertain, has some key values that need to be incorporated into the daily operation of higher education institutions. The first and more important value is **Flexibility**. Both online and hybrid learning have revealed the limitless possibilities of time and place for learning. New learners from numerous parts of the world, students who work and study, students with learning needs, and neurodivergent learners can all have access to quality education in different formats. The traditional four-year college experience is on its way to extinction (Meigs, 2020). Admissions worldwide are shifting, and every day more students aspire programs that allow them to travel, work, experience multiple learning experiences at the time. Flexibility is a key component for the future, and universities need to re-design their college strategy to project that flexibility to prospective students.

Flexibility is present not only in the offered modalities but in the education process. To be coherent with the value, faculty members need to embark on a mindset for transformation. Evaluation, experiences, internships all need to be aligned with the flexibility model.

The second key value for the future of higher education is **Personalization**. Its popularity in marketing and social media has demonstrated that personalization is key for the future strategy in higher education (Hjorth, 2021). We are already witnessing how people are customizing their learning experiences combining YouTube videos, MOOC's, courses both free, and paid to build up their new model. Universities must resist the temptation to remain traditional and embrace the new era for agile evolution. Offering the possibility to personalize your curricula, with a combination of learning experiences will allow education to remain valuable over time. Therefore, digital technologies are here to stay beyond the pandemic. Artificial intelligence allows us to upgrade the education experience for the uncertain future. Open universities that build strong collaborations are the ones that will evolve and survive the pandemic.

Conclusions

Universities face challenging and demanding times. The pandemic evidenced already existing problems for the innovation in HE. Units for innovation are the catalyst for developing and change acceptance in the academic community. For the transitions beyond, permanent professional development and re-design for education are key for survival. The new key values that will guide the future for HE need to be around flexibility and personalization. Universities should adapt in a more agile way to behavior from new generations. These calibrations will shift the education ecosystems deeper than anticipated. COVID-19 was only an accelerating force for the much-needed evolution for HE.

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