



The University of the Future.
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The university of the future? Changing with the times

Dan Remenyi 08 February 2020



Universities have been important institutions in society for a very long time. They provided a wide range of people with the education they needed to pursue professional careers. This approach was so successful that it was taken for granted that getting a university education is a 'good thing' and offers a relatively fast track to success.

But times have changed. With the exception of elite universities, graduates are no longer quite as certain of obtaining a good job as before. The labour market is much more competitive and there is a greater emphasis on instant results.

Leaders in commerce and industry have been critical of universities for not producing work-ready graduates. In addition, the intense focus on research in the modern university may not necessarily have had a positive impact on university teaching.

Within universities there has been some disquiet about management practices, including the remuneration packages awarded to vice-chancellors and other high office bearers. Student debt has become a major problem in some parts of the world.

So what should we do?

The changing university

In the first place we need to understand that universities have become large multi-product, multi-process and multifunctional businesses. This change has been largely imposed on them because government funding has not been as generous as in previous years. Institutions today are quite different from universities 50 years ago and we need to understand this.

It is also important to emphasise that universities should be about education, education, education and that it is essential to ensure that the essence of education is understood.

Education is not so much about transferring facts and figures or skills. It is certainly not about getting learners to memorise blocks of information. Education is about developing a mindset where the learner realises his or her ability to face challenging situations and come up with satisfactory solutions to problems. Of course, knowledge is required to achieve this, but students need more than knowledge.

Becoming work-ready is not a good reason to go to university, but there is no doubt that becoming work-savvy, which requires *inter alia* an achievement mindset, is a very useful thing.

It has been known for a long time that attending lectures is one of the least effective ways of learning. So learning by doing has to be the main way forward and working alongside accomplished practitioners has much to offer. The 'University of the Future' will therefore place a greater emphasis on collaboration with practitioners.

Universities have to be careful not to jam-pack their students' days with work, though. University is a time for individual exploration through discussion with others and reading works that broaden the mind.



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A different way to examine knowledge

Then there is how we examine knowledge. Like lectures, traditional examinations often do not really test what students know in any depth. Students anticipate exam questions and learn answers to previously asked questions off by heart.

It has been said that in ancient China admission to the civil service was highly competitive, requiring many years of study and a day-long examination. The interesting thing is that the examination question was always the same every year and it was well known to everyone. The question went something like this: "Write down what you know which demonstrates that you are worthy of a position in your country's administration."

Today a similar question for those about to graduate might be: "Write down what you know about economics or mathematics or civil engineering or whatever your subject is which will allow this university to be confident that you are worthy of being awarded a degree." This approach to examinations, if correctly applied, would help make a university education much more relevant.

Giving back

It is clear that the University of the Future will be different to what it is today. But it is essential not to forget the achievements of the past. Universities have made remarkable contributions to improving peoples' lives.

Universities have often been at the forefront of developing new ideas, new processes and new products. Universities have encouraged individuals who have gone on to become leaders in all walks of life. And universities, through bringing together young and enthusiastic individuals, have drawn attention to our need to aspire to a better way of life.

We must not forget, however, that attending university is a privilege. Irrespective of who pays for it, the experience of higher education is very expensive. Those who obtain a degree need to be aware of the requirement to put something into the society which has facilitated their intellectual development.

Universities do not emphasise this enough today. No one can ever really pay back the help they receive to grow and succeed, but everyone can pay it forward and help others to achieve their potential.

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