

Universities should lead the fight to preserve humanity

Trent Batson 25 January 2020

Climate-induced regional disasters are happening at a greater scale than previously experienced. The overall worldwide extinction event – the Anthropocene – has started. The example of the 2019 California and 2019-20 Australia wildfires is fresh in our minds and they clarify the need to respond in coordinated ways during and after a disaster.

Yet hardly a day goes by without a new report on the climate crisis. To address human survival during this climate crisis, I and others have launched **The Last Humans Project**.

Background

Global higher education, which comprises around 19,400 institutions, according to **the World Higher Education Database**, is responding to climate change through initiatives for ‘sustainability’ or ‘resilience’. The focus is usually on institutions preparing their campuses to function despite disruptions from climate change and, as a second goal, to reduce the institutional carbon footprint.

Some courses in higher education do aim at raising consciousness among students about climate change, but, generally, it is safe to say that global higher education does not see itself as a whole-sector leader for global action to ‘fight’ climate change or to help human society adapt to inevitable climate change effects.

Why not? With 250,000,000 students enrolled, global higher education is the largest single entity that could potentially act collectively around one mission to lead the human response to the climate crisis.

Promoting civil society

Higher education, as a primarily non-profit sector, has the specific requirement to ‘do social good’. There is no doubt that educating the populace is a social good. But what about ‘social good’ interpreted as preserving civil society as part of a collaborative force to deal with a shared crisis?

This would move higher education beyond developing individuals who, when they graduate, may or may not themselves do ‘social good’. What if, instead, some percentage of those graduates had deep experience of working on climate crisis projects?

Global higher education could preserve civil society and humanity in this way: adopt one universal mission statement for all 19,400 institutions and adopt a version of the ‘extinction rebellion’ curriculum as proposed by **The Last Humans Project**.

This project shows, through a review of evolution studies, that humans invented language far earlier than is commonly claimed by evolution researchers, not 50,000 years ago but 2.5 million years ago. Therefore, we show, it was language that produced our thinking, our society and our culture and that, therefore, we humans have evolved within a culture during the most formative period of evolution.

Since language and culture are the actual drivers of humanity and the entire species faces extinction, we must re-organise learning in higher education to build on our core human abilities. Let’s swim with the current of humanity rather than against it.

By emphasising not just STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics – which are all derivative thinking abilities, but the source of those derivatives (language), we can use our natural tendencies and build on them to help humanity survive. We can build a curriculum that fosters our communication abilities, creativity, innovation and action, a curriculum which is just what this century needs.

Mission statement

This might seem complicated, but it's not. All institutions which take part in the project would adopt this mission statement:

- To lead the world in preserving human society during the current mass extinction caused by climate change.
- To offer a programme that enrolees can choose that will engage them immediately upon matriculation in real-world projects aimed at preparing human society for extinction events such as floods, fires, rising seas, droughts, heat waves and famine, as well as climate refugees and other similar climate change effects that are bringing about the sixth mass extinction on Earth that includes a threat of human extinction.

Then, all institutions would organise their existing courses to include projects related to climate adaptation in the region – problem-based courses in almost any field, courses in writing or history or geography or political science or engineering, courses that develop creativity for innovation and problem-solving, such as courses in poetry taught as a course *in creativity* (or any similar courses such as in architecture or music or design).

There is no need for new courses and getting them approved by curriculum committees (or whatever they might be called) and suffering the delay that brings while the world burns.

A new 'major' or 'concentration' or 'course of study' (whatever is appropriate in your context) could be put in place immediately with an institutional administrative push.

And, to add to the incentive, no better course of study exists. If one's goal is only 'life success' and not 'saving humanity', this course of study with the mission statement given above would still be the best life preparation for our age.

How competitive would it be to promote your institution as offering a climate change concentration that prepares students for the world they will live in.

No strings attached

The Last Humans Project, right now, is an offering to the world with no strings attached. No one profits from the project in the usual ways at this point. If anyone wants to adopt the ideas at the site – **thelasthumans.org** – we only ask for attribution.

I am a university professor/professional staff who enjoyed a tenured status and who then became a technology director and then worked for the Office of Educational Innovation and Technology (OEIT) at MIT (among many other jobs). (OEIT is now "archived"). I then founded and led the Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-Based Learning (AAEEBL) from 2009 to 2017. AAEEBL had institutional members in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia.

At this point, I have only collegial affiliations with higher education. I do the project because of my grandchildren.

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