Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

Rising to the challenges of Tomorrow

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Professor Stephanie Marshall

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This short report sets out to identify key challenges for higher education, as seen by a range of global leaders, moving on to how these might be addressed, focusing on workforce development.

1. Background

Increasingly, higher education is recognised as core to the furtherance of a nation's social and economic goals, promoting the education of a flexible and adaptable workforce capable of tackling global 'wicked issues'. The demands on, and challenges for, higher education are as never before. This short report sets out to identify key challenges for higher education, as identified by a range of global leaders, moving on to address how these might be addressed, focussing on workforce development. There is a particular focus on 'teaching excellence' as the means by which the present and future workforce can be supported in responding to these key challenges, becoming suitably skilled up, inspired and motivated to make an engaged contribution.

The data gathered to inform this report was generated by responses to a brief set of questions circulated to 25 university Presidents (or equivalent, i.e. global leaders), requesting their views on four questions: (1) what are the 5 key global challenges that will face the HE sector over the next ten years, (2) how they would envisaged staff being supported in rising to meet these challenges; (3) how much of a priority they perceive 'teaching excellence' will be, and, if they believe it is a priority, (4) how they perceive 'teaching excellence' can be achieved. The response rate was 11, coming from 9 countries (the UK, US, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Israel, South Africa, and the Netherlands) from around the globe.

2. Findings

Global Challenges

By and large there was strong convergence around the key themes. **Technological changes** ('rapid ubiquitous technological advance… this is a part of who we are… in higher education generally and [in] global labour markets"), was referred to by seven respondents, citing particularly the challenge such change presented when interfacing with teaching and learning ("breaking out of strictly disciplinary degree programmes to reflect changing needs of modern technological societies"; "almost every career will demand some understanding of data science and algorithmic thinking"; "at this point, we do not sufficiently understand how to fully integrate information technologies into our formal and informal modes of learning"). It was recognised by a number of respondents that the focus needed to be on "individualised, flexible technological enhancements", if only to keep up with the vast diversity of learner approaches.

Equally as highly cited challenges was the area of **teaching and learning**, with respondents referring to the need to address "internal barriers such as structures and processes, and organisational cultures that may traditionally have valued research more highly than student education". Such reference to the internal barriers was picked up by others, who referred to the need for a "rebalance" between teaching and research, stressing the need to recognise and reward teaching excellence ("research outputs and incomes are dominated for almost all promotion or contract renewal exercises"), and, address "rebooting and refreshing staff,

particularly those whose period on the mid-career plateau has extended, with respect to teaching and learning skills". This training and development theme was picked up more broadly as a key challenge by many, as "we require people to set the pace: and the pace will need to be driven".

Interdisciplinarity was seen as a key challenge, assisting not just staff but students to address "the global grand challenges" but more as a means of moving on to highlight the centrality and importance of the curriculum. One respondent, referring to curriculum and pedagogic challenges stated "curriculum is the big issue for the future". Of more concern, was how to design and deliver a relevant and 'connected' curriculum. The requirement for such curricula was cited by a four respondents, with particular reference to the need for more project-based, industrial links, accompanied by "more inclusive pedagogies in delivering the curriculum", and more individualised support. As one respondent noted, the challenge is "to provide programmes that allow individual students to construct their own subject combinations, according to how they see their role in the changing world of work, and to provide learning platforms and schedules that are sufficient and flexible to be customised to suit the individual's life situation."

Finally, a further key challenge focused on the concern to revisit the question **'what are universities for'**, seeing the current socio-political context as presenting a particular challenge:

"To proactively and vocally challenge the anti-globalisation and anti-intellectual rhetoric that is coming from certain political leaders… [which would include the] harnessing of social media more effectively to involve our students, staff and friends in the development and achievement of our goals."… "Remember that universities are amongst the most resilient structures in societies and will not be blown off course by short-terms turbulence or uncertainty."

So – moving on to cast our eyes forward to the future rather than become bogged down by the present, the question was, how best to support our staff in rising to the meeting of these challenges.

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[1] Often referred to as 'global challenges' or 'wicked problems'. These are problems so severe and so complex that finding answers almost seems impossible. The term originated in social planning but is now often used to refer to economic and political issues for example, climate change, health care, and nuclear weapons.

3. Supporting higher education staff rise to meet these challenges

When exploring how best to support staff rise to meet the challenge of **technological advancements**, responses flagged up the need to move from the rhetoric of 'challenge' to one of 'opportunity':

"In the first place, we need to be cognisant that there are fundamental natural trends but there are no inevitabilities in terms of the ways in which society must respond. We can design new relationships with technology. We can design new relationships to knowledge. We can design new technology-enabled pathways to connect learners with knowledge. This should be empowering. Within this context, we should see all of these challenges coupled with opportunities, then focus on the promises of opportunity rather than the burden of challenge."

However, interfacing these technological advances with changes in approaches to **teaching and learning**, another respondent saw certain staff as being the biggest barrier to change:

"Academic staff will be required to adapt to new learning platforms and schedules, to regard all students as individuals with individual trajectories, and to respond swiftly to their needs. The role of the academic shifts from instructor to coach. The greatest problem in this regard will be the reluctance of academics to embrace their new roles."

To address the reluctance to change amongst a number of academics, it was suggested by many that institutions need to "reward those who invest their academic and professional expertise in student education and the students experience", and advising that there needs to be a "reframing of the curricula and student assessments, to make them more research-rich and more directly relevant to local, national and global issues." One respondent stated that "having a high bar for success requires strong performance management", with another suggesting that the only way to assist HE staff to rise to meet these challenges, was to deploy data and metrics, and "…measure, assess, mentor and develop teachers as well as researchers…"

4. How much of a priority will driving teaching excellence be in the future?

Respondents were unanimous in their belief that teaching excellence has to be a priority, for example:

"Crucial. A university's most important outputs are its graduates. Students are our ambassadors as well as our products. We have a moral and social obligation to cherish them, understand their needs, listen to their concerns, and respond where we can, explain why not if we cannot. Teachers can lead innovation."

There were, however, differences of emphasis.

A grounded practical response:

"Outcomes-based education (OBE) is a good way to drive teaching excellence, as feedback from alumni, industrial partners and current students do help reflect the exact situation of teaching conducted in a university."

With respect to harnessing technology:

"I have been so impressed with some of the innovations by some of our teachers, harnessing modern technologies, playing to the strengths of younger generations, adapting to students' wishes. I particularly like the concept of 'teach less to teach more'."

A more consumerist, market-led response:

"The higher education market will increasingly see power shift from institutions to individuals. Individual students will have greater choice, and their choices will rest on the criteria of cost, programme reputation and service. Teaching excellence will increasingly consist of how effectively academics provide 'service', and service indicators will be selected by individual students."

Returning to the notion of 'what are universities for', one respondent suggested:

"I see knowledge as the core of social progress and teaching as the pathway to making knowledge actionable. Accordingly, teaching excellence [is] inestimably important."

So – how then do we achieve this teaching excellence?

5. How is teaching excellence best achieved?

This question resulted in respondents revisiting what they had perceived as the key challenges facing the HE sector. There was much discussion about changing the culture:

 "Foster a culture of quality and enhancement, through dialogue and collaboration."

There were nuanced approaches to how best to bring about this culture, firstly an emphasis on the need for strategic approaches which primarily focused on Human Resources (HR) policies and practices, particularly promotions criteria and developmental opportunities. These included reward and recognition schemes ("rewarding and promoting excellent university teachers and education–focused leaders" and "recognising teaching innovators"), developmental opportunities "providing support for improving teaching skills, and gaining exposure to new approaches. Pairing junior and senior instructors in co-teaching often works well". Additional resources and funding were referred to by several respondents:

 "Providing extra resources to redevelop problematic existing courses is also important" or "giving faculty time … to develop modern course materials and experiment with technology".

The centrality of curriculum and pedagogic approaches was the second aspect seen as crucial to bring about the requisite change of culture to future proof the institution:

"Perhaps the core component of teaching excellence is the construction of the programme and its delivery, which occurs prior to the interaction that we regard as 'teaching'. The programme – and the flexibility and effectiveness of its delivery – will result in more than half the job done. And by whatever means individual universities decide on the criteria of excellence in teaching, teaching must be a key component of performance evaluations, and must be foregrounded in criteria for promotion."

Other responses focused on evaluating and learning from the impact of the teaching:

"Regardless of … how we teach, the outcomes, that is the quality of graduates can provide the quality of teaching. To achieve this goal, case studies, projects and interactive lecturing are important."

Reference to 'students as partners' was interwoven in the responses, with the further suggestion:

"Value innovation, allow experimentation so that lessons can be learned. Respond to feedback and objective criticism. Modify, re-assess, adapt, involve students in their own teaching. Measure outcomes and prioritise resources accordingly."

And, finally, respondents returned to global key challenges and how best to future-proof higher education:

"Teaching excellence is increasingly derivative of a capacity to adapt. The rate of knowledge production is so high as to render the traditional notion of established best practices difficult to contend with. Accordingly, in years to come, our best teachers will be those that have a capacity to seamlessly integrate technology into complex adaptive learning environments."

6. Conclusions

Perhaps readers will find no surprises in what they have just read. The identification of technology as an accelerator of progress is well rehearsed elsewhere, providing both opportunities and threats. Perhaps more surprising is the long overdue escalation of teaching and learning (which has long been the poor relation to research) to centre stage, and the recognition that much needs to be done to bring about parity of esteem between education and research within higher education. There was unanimous recognition amongst respondents that students are our future, and a failure to educate the next generation of leaders, problem-solvers, critical thinkers and global citizens will be to our (and the world's) detriment. An educational experience which results from a connected and engaged curriculum, and pedagogic approaches which harness technology, is seen, therefore, as a key priority. To deliver such an experience requires, of course, a culture of excellence which is only achieved through committed and passionate higher education staff working to a clear, shared vision and a common set of goals.

In summary, this short report, based on 'conversations' with 11 global leaders, found strong agreement about key challenges (technology and education), and strong agreement regarding the infrastructural issues (primarily HR policies and practices, to include change management programmes focused on the curriculum and pedagogic practices) that strategic leaders need to address to bring about the requisite cultural change that will assist in the future proofing of their universities. It is only through rising to this set of challenges in a constructive and positive way, that universities can really provide impactful societal benefit.

Contact us

+44 (0)1904 717500   enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk
Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR
Twitter: @HEAcademy   www.heacademy.ac.uk