

Higher education is under siege. It needs to reinvent itself

Universities need to develop their students more holistically, cultivate resilience and facilitate employability over a lifetime.



Lily Kong

In a recent late-night Zoom call, I spoke with a leading professor from one of the best universities in the United States. The conversation turned to whether the current turmoil in US higher education would, in her view, pass, if we waited patiently two to three years. The response was chilling. "After Trump, we can't go back. Trump took away one thing that was great in America. It took so long for America to be the chosen destination for students and their parents, and for the best brains looking to undertake their research in a stimulating environment. This will no longer return."

In a post-colonial twist, she then mused that "perhaps it's not a bad thing... (for) the last vestiges of empire (to fall)". The hope she held out was for universities in Asia – and South-east Asia, in particular – to become sources of light in a darkening world.

By now, readers will be aware of the wrenching developments that threaten US universities: funding cuts, visa revocations, a halt to international student enrolment at Harvard ("Harvard, for now, the rest of us will have our turn," another US academic shared), and a halt to issuing student visa applicant interview appointments.

This comes on the back of many other challenges in recent times – Congress hearings on campus anti-Semitism with highly publicised appearances by

presidents of leading universities, pro-Palestinian protests on campuses, hostile environments in an anti-DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) climate, and so on. Decades of disinvestment in public education have reached a breaking point in some places. State funding for public universities has been steadily declining since the 1980s, shifting the burden onto students and deepening the crisis of affordability. Similar crises have been observed in the UK, Australia and elsewhere.

In the midst of such turmoil, trust in universities has eroded. A Gallup poll in 2023 showed that only 36 per cent of Americans reported having "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, a significant decline from 57 per cent in 2015 and 48 per cent in 2018. All this is part of a larger loss of trust in institutions, including the US Supreme Court which won the trust of only 35 per cent of Americans in 2024.

THE EXISTENTIAL TECH DISRUPTION

As if these troubles did not suffice, they have been accompanied by the seismic shift brought on by generative artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. Many of the traditional white-collar jobs that university graduates once aspired to are vanishing or being radically reshaped.

The challenge is no longer just to educate students for existing industries but to prepare them for a labour market in flux – where adaptability and resilience, digital literacy, ethical reasoning and creativity are key.

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education system is, by almost every measure, in a state of profound upheaval. The pain is not confined to the Anglosphere. Across the Global South, higher education systems have been chronically underfunded, often with outdated infrastructure and limited access to cutting-edge research. But ironically, these same regions are where the demographic bulge of university-age students is most pronounced – and where demand for education is exploding.

Perhaps it is with this in mind that the American professor I began this essay with had looked hopefully to South-east Asia for a better higher education future. It holds promise – but only if it takes an early path to reinvention and avoids the seduction of

overcrowded lectures; narrow, rigid curricula; knowledge acquisition and didactic pedagogy, all of which seem ill-suited to a world where information is ubiquitous and rapidly synthesised by machines. The value proposition of a university degree – long predicated on employment outcomes – deserves to be under scrutiny, given such circumstances.

STRAIN ACROSS THE GLOBE

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looking to the "old" models of "world-class universities" elsewhere for inspiration.

A PATH TO REINVENTION

In a series of lectures I had the honour of delivering last year as SR Nathan Fellow, I made a call for four reforms: to go beyond cognitive intelligence to nurture multiple intelligences; to nurture students' human qualities in the face of the technological juggernaut; to embrace interdisciplinarity as depth (not just the "dilettantism" of breadth); and to transform universities into lifelong partners that engage learners across all life stages, beyond the traditional ages of 18 to 25.

Let me highlight some of the reforms that speak to the crises I mentioned earlier: disinvestment in higher education, failure to teach relevant skills, graduate debt and unemployment, eroding relevance and loss of trust in universities. To remain relevant, not only for youth, but for lifetimes, universities need to go beyond the long-established approach of emphasising knowledge acquisition to developing the whole person. More than cultivating cognitive intelligence, universities should also look to develop interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. The ability to detect and respond appropriately to the moods, motivations and desires of others (interpersonal intelligence) is as critical as cultivating self-awareness, being in tune with one's inner feelings, values and beliefs, and being able to draw from within to reinvent oneself (intrapersonal intelligence). But these are seldom embedded systematically into development programmes, nor codified as learning outcomes.

Still less has been done to help build resilience, essential for navigating the challenges and uncertainties of the future. The extended pressures of prolonged education, frequent career transitions and navigating an increasingly dynamic job market can take a significant toll on mental health. Reskilling is a prerequisite.

Universities have a role to help students in developing all of these qualities. Crucial in a world of rapid change is the spirit of exploration and experimentation, necessary if one is to reinvent oneself in a dynamic world.

When individuals confront a world where they have to periodically start afresh, they will need to be comfortable with exploration and cultivate a willingness to try new ways of thinking and doing. This attitude can be taught, not taught. It can be facilitated, such as through crucible experiences where an individual comes to a new or altered state of awareness and identity. Living in a new city, or immersing oneself in unfamiliar environments, offers such opportunities and universities should facilitate them.

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Need to reimagine not just what education is, but also what it's for

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While it is easy to offer the opportunity for a student exchange semester, or an internship overseas, the activity itself is not learning. It is the self-reflexivity that turns activity into learning, then into valuable experience. This is the current gap in most universities. But in an age where universities are asked to close off opportunities for students from beyond one's national boundaries, we lose the crucial opportunity to expose students to other cultures and other peoples. We need more student mobility, not less.

Another approach to cultivating a spirit of exploration and experimentation is to provide opportunities for independent production. These include giving young people a chance to engage in self-direction, to take risks and pursue self-driven projects. We

could do this, for example, by creating the space for students to design their own major.

What about that other dimension of intrapersonal intelligence – emotional resilience? This is not something cultivated overnight. Of course, mental health resources, counselling, stress management and peer support programmes have become commonplace since Covid-19. These are much needed, but more critical in the long term is developing resilience proactively rather than providing support as reactive service.

For this, we must create environments where friendships are forged and mentoring relationships developed, where community engagement and wellness practices like mindfulness are systematically introduced. They build support systems that last through personal and professional lives.

Such efforts need to be intentional and planned, much like the attention that curriculum has been given.

In brief, universities need to think expansively about the development of the whole person, not just for its own sake but also to facilitate employability. The "irrelevancies" of non-cognitive learning ironically become centrally relevant in the university that is germane to the future.

Universities must also own lifelong learning and stop seeing education as a finite process largely confined to youth. The most obvious approach is to introduce professional and continuing education programmes that are available throughout the life course of adults, best delivered as flexible learning options like modular courses, certifications and professional development programmes. A more sophisticated approach will leverage AI and data analytics to personalise content, thus offering tailored learning experiences that match individual career aspirations.

But universities, employers and individuals can do still better, and each has a part to play. While work-learn or work-study integration has been embraced in some universities, including in

Singapore, this is confined to undergraduate programmes, such as the well-known co-operative programmes in Canada's University of Waterloo and Northeastern University in the US. They entail alternating academic terms and paid work terms.

The big opportunity is to adopt similar approaches in continuing education throughout life. If this means taking time out from work, both the individual and the employer must bear an opportunity cost. However, if the learning is paired with a project at work, it is an investment by the employer and a deliverable by the individual. This is integrating "earning and learning", where education and training are integrated with existing work responsibilities, and calls for a new learning ecosystem.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NOW

Innovation without intention can deepen inequality. Universities must reckon with their role in shaping an inclusive society and enhancing social mobility, making meaningful difference to the lives of those in the communities that are the raison d'être of their existence.

The way to do so is by shifting the times to remain relevant. Universities must be accountable,

and responsive – not only to employers, but also to the communities they serve. Governments, too, must see higher education as a public good worthy of investment. Policymakers should enable visa and immigration systems to welcome global talent, not stifle it.

The question is not whether higher education will change, but how. Will it double down on traditional measures of success, focused on prestige and exclusivity – or expand access and rethink relevance? When institutions are measured by reputations garnered over decades if not centuries, which sometimes bear little to the realities of student experience today, and when assessed by the eminence of star professors who may never teach in the classrooms, they reinforce a model of prestige and exclusivity.

Yet, with increasing loss of public trust and growing scepticism in parts of the world about the value and cost of a degree, other models of success deserve to be embraced, such as the support for more diverse populations seeking lifelong learning, career mobility and social opportunity; and the celebration of research that translates to societal impact. Will higher education retreat

from innovation and transformation – or embrace its role as society's incubator and, in so doing, reinvent itself? As the world confronts myriad challenges – demographic, environmental, geopolitical and technological – universities are uniquely positioned to respond. This requires a willingness to innovate: reimagining curriculum, rethinking pedagogies, embracing co-curricular, forming partnerships beyond academia and rethinking measures of success. The alternative is stagnation, a slow erosion of relevance, as learners and employers seek more agile alternatives.

The coming decade will determine whether universities remain cornerstones of society, central to individual successes and collective advancement – or relics of a bygone era. The challenges are vast. But so too is the opportunity – for a system that reimagines not just what education is, but what it's for. If higher education can meet this moment with courage and creativity, it can renew its social contract and reassert its role as a vital engine of equity, innovation and civic life.

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