VIEW POINT

Part I - Disruption

A BIG DISRUPTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Skills VS Degree Debate

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> Wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it.
>
> - Albert Einstein

The COVID crisis forced the world to adopt new ways of functioning, overnight. Among the most disrupted were educational institutions. They had to adapt to remote learning models rapidly, without any prior preparation or planning. As a result, the cracks in the system are showing. But more interestingly, the situation has highlighted a debate that has been raging for a while: is a university degree still relevant in the new global reality shaping the job market?

When comparing knowledge vs skills, it appears the balance has shifted more in favour of the latter for the new-collar worker. So even as they grapple with the challenges of the pandemic, what steps can the educational institutes of today take to be on the right side of this debate?

The Reason the Debate Exists:
How the Pandemic Has Pulled Into Focus the Gaps and Inadequacies in the Current System

COVID-19 Has Further Accentuated the Problems Within Higher Educational Institutions

Gaps in relaying expectations to the students on learning schedules and plans

Challenges in virtual classrooms with disjointed collaboration tools impacting experience

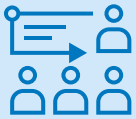
Gaps in assessments administration including cancellations of exams

General fatigue in daily sessions due to absence of interactions or real-time engagement

Teachers having challenges in keeping students focused and away from distractions

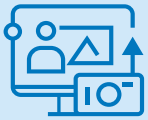
Internet connectivity and devices issues impacting sessions planning and execution

Level of engagement not the same as the experience in physical setup due to gaps in implementing anytime, anywhere culture



Lack of peer learning opportunities both for the teachers and students

Inability to provide access of recording and/or discussion points to students' missed sessions



Teachers and students both not equipped for virtual learning sessions

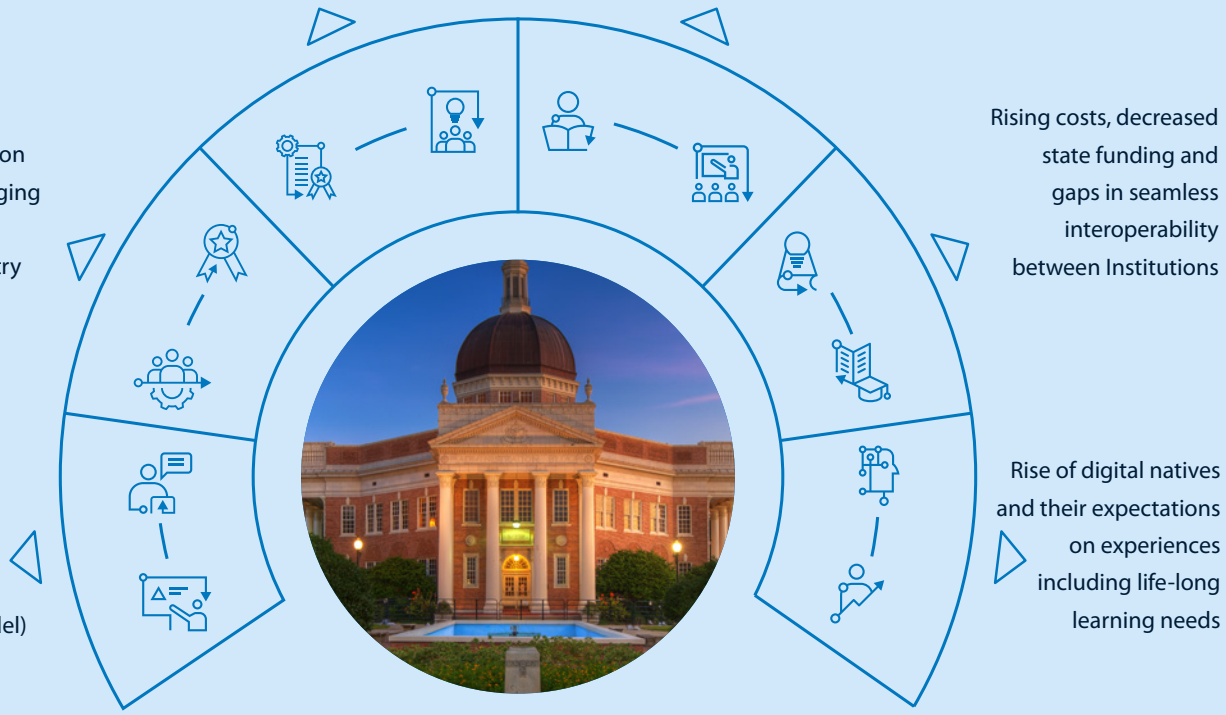
Across the education sector, COVID has brought about an accelerated digitization of the learning experience. As universities scramble to adopt new technologies and tools to reflexively cater to the new normal, it has come at the cost of a cohesive vision, foresight and long-term planning.

As a result, there are numerous gaps in the learning experience: online classes negatively impacted by disjointed collaboration tools, delays in communicating plans and schedules to students, inconsistencies in assessment administration, the inability of teachers to keep students focussed with constant virtual distractions. There's also choppy Internet connectivity and device performance issues impacting planning and execution, general fatigue due to absence of real-time interactions as well as lack of peer learning opportunities. These are all contributing to a disillusionment and disengagement with the coursework, resulting in drop-offs mid-semester, and decline in academic engagement.

All of this is making students question whether paying for a full-time traditional university education is worth it. Particularly in these tumultuous times when they believe the quality of learning is so compromised. We are currently seeing an unprecedented decline in enrolments. But this has been a consistent trend even before the pandemic hit.

A Declining Trend in Enrolments:
Factors Contributing to Plurality of Students Opting Out of Traditional Education Pathways

Disruptions Facing Higher Educational Institutions – A Macro View



1 The 'sage-on-the-stage' model has lost favour. So what comes next?

Students are questioning legacy knowledge systems. With the internet and data boom, and free information at their fingertips, they don't see a lot of relevance for the legacy classroom and structured curriculum system. If they can access relevant knowledge anytime, anywhere, for free, what does the university really offer in terms of learning and staying relevant? Thus the need to shift to a 'guide on the side' methodology to partner students in a lifelong quest for education, leaning more towards a bite sized lesson format, where it's not just about theoretical understanding of topics, but rather value-added experiences and other offerings. There is a real need for any kind of pedagogical innovation that can bring the subject matter to life and empower students to engage more in all kinds of classroom settings, both real and virtual.

2

Rigid, one-way teaching methodologies often backfire. How can technology help?

Today's students are digital natives with certain expectations for how they want the learning experience to be. While universities have made huge strides in digital adoption and reimagining the learning ecosystem, they still have a long journey ahead. There is a need to replicate the social interactions and create an experience-based boundaryless world, where the new-age student thrives. This is a far cry from the rigid approach of engaging with learners, which makes the process a chore and as a consequence, diminishes their interest in getting a degree. There is a huge opportunity for education institutions to incorporate the social features of following friends, faculty, getting playlists of recommended reading, cool dashboards and current gen gamification badges to help them stay engaged with learning and not make it seem like a task.

3

Education is a huge investment in time and money. Do students believe it's worth it?

The pandemic has shed light on what has been a long-standing issue of financial constraints for many students. Many among the current student cohorts have to work part-time or have a side gig to pay for the rising cost of tuition. This has made them more value-oriented, making them ask the hard questions about what they are really getting out of their degrees. Lowered accessibility of student loans is also the cause of deferred decisions to go to college, as students wonder if the degree would really help in their career, or would it just be a burden of debt they would have to pay off for a long period of time.

The gaps in seamless interoperability between universities has also led to many students delaying their college education. With the realities of today, they don't want to be tied down to a certain place. Instead, they prefer the option to transfer to another institute in another place and just pick up where they left off. This is where bringing in the aspects of micro credentials and modular learning would help students. They would be able to learn what they need, thus making it light on their pockets. This could also mean they can study from places with lower living expenses, making college a really viable option for them.

4

The student profile is changing. How can universities attract the new breed of learners?

In the current times, there are fewer and fewer applicants who fit the conventional profile of students right out of high school, backed by parents and a financial loan, whose only ambitions are academic. Many learners these days are working professionals who want to continue to skill themselves and are keen on pursuing various academic interests. Some other profiles include folks on a sabbatical, people between jobs, young parents or homemakers balancing various requirements, including their own. To engage these diverse sets of students, the curricula will have to be modular to help them manage their time and achieve their learning outcomes.

A very engaging dashboard that shares positive nudges powered by analytics, will go a long way in ensuring students do not drop off but continue their learning efforts. If shorter courses, at a fraction of a fee, are launched in an online mode, then the universities will be able to attract more learners. Partnerships with financial institutions will allow learners to have access to wallet-friendly payment plans. Industry partnerships will also help roll out the right incentives to students from financial to job opportunities. Thus, a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach will make it easy for them to keep the focus on completing their learning journey.

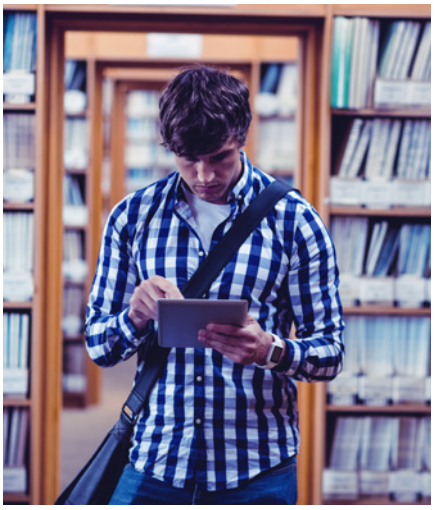
Industry Says No-Degree-Required for New Hires: For Some Big Companies, the Debate of Degree VS Skill Is Already Settled

Futurists such as Mike Colagrossi suggest in the future we will acquire skills rather than degrees: "Increasingly there are more and more renowned and prestigious companies that no longer require a college degree for work. Recently powerhouses such as Apple and Google have shifted in their approach too."

Quite a few of the Fortune 500 companies in the world have rescinded their requirement of a degree when looking for new hires. Companies like Google, Hilton, Whole Foods, Apple, IBM, Bank Of America are increasingly looking at hiring people with non-traditional education and don't see that as a disadvantage. If alternative learning pathways can compete on the same playing field as a degree from a university, it stands to reason, the more interesting, the more digital-age-savvy format will win.

In the past, the link between industry and universities was based on the latter's R&D capabilities, as students worked in tandem with companies, funnelling insights, products and IPs to the former. However, fast-paced customer expectations and demands mean companies can no longer rely on universities to be their think tanks, to aid with insights and research. They have to work faster with an internal team of stakeholders who will have more responsiveness towards innovations and staying ahead of competition. Therefore, educational institutions will now have to proactively reach out to different industry segments and partner on proposed applied research projects and innovation efforts. This means universities now have to offer something special beyond R&D resources and labs. They have to offer experiences that give students a chance to synchronize with the processes, skills and workflow internal to the organizations.

Hard skill bootcamps, short term programs, micro-certifications: these are just the start. There is a requirement to align and diversify these kinds of initiatives to various requirements, like manufacturing and engineering. For this, institutions will need to constantly look at the changes in the industry landscape and plough back to reimagining the academic curriculum, rather than relying on a fixed structure.



Transforming Higher Education: Beating the Current Crises and Getting a Leg-Up in the Skill VS Degree Debate

Currently, there are 3 disruptions impacting education:

A. The pandemic and its far-reaching implications

B. Changing student mindsets and profiles

C. Fast-paced industry transformations and widening worker skill gaps

There is no time like now for the higher education sector to adapt to these changes, take a long-term strategic view and think beyond degree as well as academic lineage. The current crisis is an opportunity to shape the virtual elements of the learning ecosystem and carve out different innovative methodologies to augment the institutes' offerings. As we move into a post-pandemic era, this is the moment to recast the university as not just a seat of academic knowledge but also as an adaptive, collaborative experiential platform that distributes the ability to teach and learn. This is where technology can step in. A deeper and sustained digital adoption will not just enrich the process of knowledge disbursement, but also help in myriad ways with skilling students, truly making them ready to face the complex world of today.

If universities want to win in the debate of skills vs degree, they must be able to balance both, transforming themselves with the help of technology to achieve an adeptness with these two formats, doing equal justice to them.

Stay tuned to know how this can be accomplished.

The Author

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In his tenure at Infosys, which spans 23+ years, Thirumala Arohi (known as Thiru) has managed many vital client relationships for financial services clients in Europe before taking on the current role of Head of Education, Training and Assessment (ETA). The ETA department is one of the key business enabling departments at Infosys. Thiru drives various learning interventions to enable the workforce to be future-ready.

In this journey of creating next-gen learning experiences, ETA has progressed well in establishing and enhancing digital learning platforms that enable 'anytime, anywhere, on any device' learning. Several partnering agreements are in place with universities and MOOCs like Udacity and Coursera in leveraging their programs. Along with driving content digitally, the learning and development arm of ETA also focuses on developing holistic skills in the areas of business, behavioral and leadership such as design thinking.

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