

Learning curve

Universities **need to change** the way they function to remain relevant

The ivory tower is crumbling. Universities, once bastions of knowledge and enlightenment, now face an existential threat: technology. The seismic shifts reshaping higher education are both exhilarating and alarming, prompting a re-evaluation of what universities are and what they should become.

One of the most profound changes is the democratisation of information. Just as patients now enter doctors' offices armed with information from the internet – challenging the traditional doctor-patient relationship – students have unprecedented access to knowledge. This challenges the traditional asymmetry between professors and students, necessitating

a transformation in the educator's role from sole dispenser of knowledge to facilitator of learning.

The future of education hinges on embracing personalised and lifelong learning. The world has moved from multi-generational careers, where one's profession was inherited, to simultaneous multi-careers, where individuals juggle multiple roles and continuously adapt to new fields. Universities, however, have been slow to adjust to this reality. The rapid advancement of technology renders specific skills obsolete at an unprecedented pace. Learning a programming language today might be irrelevant tomorrow as artificial intelligence (AI) automates coding tasks. Therefore, the most critical skills to impart are the ability to learn quickly and to make connections across different domains.

Outside the box

Breaking free from traditional models is imperative.

Universities are often constrained by rigid structures dictating that all content is produced in-house, faculty are permanent and tenured, and programmes are of fixed duration and format. These 'frames' stifle innovation. To remain relevant, universities need to become platforms that embrace collaboration and integrate external expertise.

An illustrative metaphor comes from the world of entertainment. Cirque du Soleil revolutionised the circus industry by removing animals from their performances. This bold move eliminated costly and controversial elements, allowing them to focus on human artistry, storytelling and innovation. Similarly, universities need to 'remove the animals from the centre' – a metaphor for shedding outdated practices and hierarchies that impede progress. By eliminating entrenched systems, such as rigid tenure tracks and insular academic silos, universities can reallocate resources toward innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration and student-centred learning.

Adopting cutting-edge technologies is key. The role of simulation in healthcare education offers a blueprint. Medical training has advanced through the use of simulations, allowing practitioners to hone their skills before interacting with real patients. Education can adopt similar approaches, using virtual reality and other immersive technologies to create engaging learning experiences that prepare students for real-world challenges.

Just add tech?

Look no further than AI-driven personalised learning. Imagine an educational experience where AI curates a hyper-personalised curriculum tailored to each student's goals, needs and learning style. Universities have the resources and credibility to pioneer this approach, offering something that fragmented bootcamps and online platforms cannot replicate at scale.

Industry leaders offer valuable lessons. Companies like Apple have mastered the art of creating frictionless user experiences. Universities should aspire to make the learning journey seamless, from enrolment to graduation. This includes streamlining administrative processes, offering flexible pathways and recognising prior learning and competencies. By reducing friction, universities can enhance student engagement and satisfaction.

Moreover, adopting a 'moonshot' mentality, similar to Google's X lab, can spur innovation within universities. Establishing dedicated units focused on experimenting with new teaching methods, technologies and programme structures can drive the transformation needed to stay ahead in a rapidly changing landscape. These units operate with the agility of startups but leverage the resources and reputation of the university.

Work together

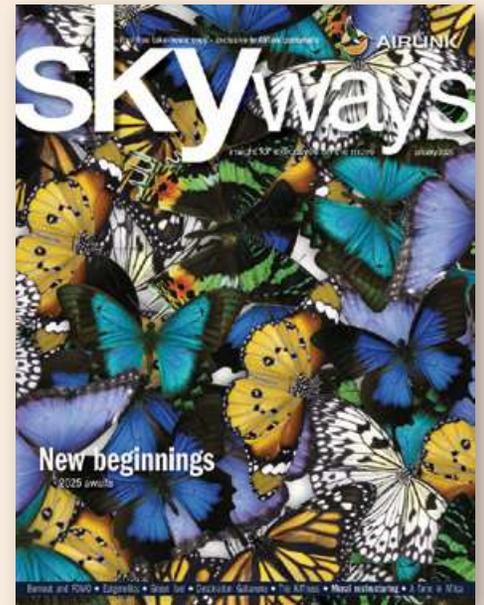
Another key is collaboration. Just as in the medical field, where interdisciplinary teams improve patient outcomes, universities can enhance educational outcomes through partnerships. This could mean joint programmes between institutions, integrating industry experts into the faculty and offering cross-disciplinary courses that reflect the interconnectedness of today's world.

To achieve this vision, universities must break down internal barriers and challenge long-standing norms. Eliminating rigid tenure systems that may promote complacency and embracing leadership from diverse backgrounds can infuse fresh perspectives and drive innovation. Just as Cirque du Soleil reimagined the circus by removing outdated elements, universities can reinvent themselves by shedding practices that no longer serve the educational mission.

The universities that will survive and thrive are those willing to embrace change boldly. They must break free from the confines of tradition, harness technology to enhance learning and reimagine their role in society. It's imperative for educational institutions to guide this transformation, ensuring that universities remain pillars of knowledge and catalysts for personal and societal growth.

The future of higher education is not predetermined. By adopting a learner-centric approach, leveraging technology for personalised learning and fostering a culture of continuous innovation, universities can redefine themselves. They can become not just places of learning but dynamic platforms that empower individuals to navigate an ever-changing world.

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