

In 10 years you won't recognise the university

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Academics beware! A relentless and gathering force is laying siege to our comfortable ivory towers.

You say you are well aware of the threat posed to academic funding by the declining economic cycle. That may be, but I think the winds rattling our tower windows are being driven by a far stronger and more enduring force.

Soon we shall further open the door, and feel the icy blast of digital disruption. Not in our field, I hear you say. However, remember similar sentiments at Kodak, which also felt itself invulnerable to the advances in photographic technology brought about by digitisation and the internet. A similar thought: was it really that long ago we used to search the Saturday newspaper classifieds for houses, jobs and cars?

As is common nowadays, a catchy acronym describes the nature of the digital storm looming on our horizon. MOOCs, massive open online courses, which will increasingly lessen the need for the student to attend university for lectures, instead bringing the university to the student's laptop, tablet computer or smart phone.

I'd suggest that within 10 years, MOOCs will become the primary means through which university students in Australia access higher learning. While the universities themselves may produce their own MOOCs for their own students, my view is that the future MOOCs will feature the top scholars from leading international institutions. This would then leave tutorials as the only forum in which most other academics would interact directly with their university's students.

Would such a development precipitate a recalibration of the role of Australian academics? I would argue that it could, and indeed should. At the minimum, universities should be preparing for such disruption with a view it will be an inevitable outcome.

Traditionally, the role of academics has primarily focused on research and teaching, with a supplementary emphasis on administration and engagement. However, perhaps reflective of the formulaic approach taken in the calculation of university rankings, and hence funding allocations, the overarching incentive for academics is to have their research work published in leading scholarly journals.

However, this fixation with research publication may be undermining the quality of the research process, as well as detracting from the incentive for academics to work for the university's best interest, in adapting the teaching program for the MOOCs juggernaut.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not advocating a seismic shift away from research to a sole focus on teaching. I'm instead urging academics and university administrators to take a broader perspective, recognising the global changes that are occurring, if they are to remain relevant and defend their university's teaching turf. Perhaps the time has come for academics to specialise in either research or teaching, and to disband the egalitarian "everyone does" approach?

Like any other profession, academics earn and retain their social legitimacy by serving society's needs. Society welcomes the innovations that flow from academic research. However, a teaching contribution that produces well-rounded and industry-ready graduates is not simply welcomed. In fact, it is more than expected, it is demanded. It is imperative that the clever country, Australia, and our universities, actively develop online education practices such that they are kept well ahead of the world's best practice.

In terms of efficiency gains, there is a major opportunity open to academics to sharpen their focus on how 21st-century teaching is delivered. This will need the financial and technology support of university administrators. This provides an opportunity to develop significant efficiency gains that also appeal to the need for students to be flexible in their weekly routines, given the many financial and educational demands on their time. For nothing to change, I would say, would be at their peril.

Another area for efficiency gains is a reform to the academic calendar. Although some universities operate a tri-semester or summer school model, the traditional two-semester academic year is barely half the length of the calendar year. The idea is that this gives academics plenty of time to teach and do research. There are nevertheless many weeks in the year when the teaching capacity of universities is effectively idle, far more than in any area of corporate enterprise.

Academics, and academic administrators, need to proactively grasp this opportunity to focus on honing their delivery of teaching to maximise the effectiveness of their university's opportunities, and to protect their turf from international competition.

Previously, in what was a research-oriented environment, the mantra for academics was publish or perish.

Looking ahead, I'd instead urge my fellow academics to teach cleverly or be disrupted.

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