University of British Columbia
Centre for Policy Studies in Higher Education and Training (CHET)

Higher Education doesn't do Revolutions!

Sir John Daniel & Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić
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Much of the political discussion of higher education in the last year has been taken up by feverish talk about the revolution provoked by MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). The presentation will bring perspective to this debate by recalling some of the history of change in higher education, notably in relation to open, distance and online learning. MOOCs do not represent a paradigm shift, because they are not really higher education, but they are reinforcing trends to online learning, shorter courses, new awards and partnerships for teaching that universities will find challenging. We use the term 'post-traditional' higher education for these new formats and describe recent work to strengthen their quality.

Introduction

Colleagues: It is a pleasure to be here, thank you for inviting me. I am flattered that this distinguished Centre for policy research sees fit to invite a practitioner-scholar like me to address you. I have prepared this paper with my former UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. For many years, as head of the Higher Education unit at UNESCO, she was centrally involved with the issues we shall discuss.

Our title is *Higher Education doesn't do Revolutions!* It gives us the opportunity to reflect on the nature of change in higher education, both past and present. We speak to you at a moment when there is feverish talk about a coming revolution in higher education. Depending on whom you talk to, the drivers of that revolution are variously youth unemployment, MOOCs, or the dire finances of many universities in the US as the tuition fee bubble pops.

So we will begin by giving a brief historical perspective on change in higher education. Parts of the talk will recall our own experiences. We were both students at the University of Paris. I was there in 1968, which was probably the last time that students tried to create a revolution in higher education and managed to bring a whole country to a standstill.

I confess that I stayed away from the barricades myself since I was just finishing my doctoral research at the time. It was rumoured that if the French police caught foreign students in the demonstrations they took them to the Belgian border and told them not to come back. That did not tempt me.

A month later, in June, Stamenka was taking part as a freshman in the students' demonstration at the University of Belgrade. The Faculty of Philosophy became a centre

for gatherings of students and professors. In retrospect, nobody quite knows what these demonstrations were about: a revolution, a counter-revolution, or an attempt to copy the West? It lasted a week, the only result being that the regular exam period was extended. Some student and professors leaders were imprisoned. The rest is history.

A few years later I did an internship at the British Open University, which was labelled as a revolutionary step when it began operations in the 1970s.

We hope that the first section of the talk will persuade you that higher education does not do revolutions. But it does evolve. We shall spend much of the lecture reflecting on how it is evolving in response to contemporary changes in the environment, notably youth unemployment and MOOCs. We shall end with some remarks about the need for more research on postsecondary education and managing institutions in an evolving environment.

Clearly these are turbulent times for higher education and training. In the case of youth unemployment the problem is real and pressing. We are pleased to be speaking to a centre that does policy research on both higher education and training, because training is moving rapidly higher up the agenda of postsecondary education. As regards MOOCs, they may be a passing fad in their present form but their heirs and successors will also reinforce new trends. We shall not explore further today the grave problems that are bursting the tuition fees bubble south of the border. But that is not a revolution either, rather an overdue correction to an era of excess. However, corrections don't return us to the *status quo ante*: they take us in new directions.

We shall end with some reflections on how to manage all this better. Stamenka was Secretary-General of the Association of Universities of former Yugoslavia and then headed the section for Reform, Innovation and Quality in Higher Education at UNESCO. I spent 10 years as in vice-presidential posts in Canadian universities and then 17 years as president of two universities in Canada and the UK respectively.

In those reflections we shall argue first, that the huge global industry of higher education needs more units like CHET to illuminate its decisions with research. Second, we shall suggest that some of the current difficulties are due to a loss of the collaborative styles of leadership that have been key to the unusual longevity of universities.

The longevity of universities

Let's start there.

Clark Kerr, president of the University of California and a legendary figure in higher education, had a wonderful way with words. You will be familiar with some of his aphorisms. He described universities as 'a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs united by a common grievance over parking'. He said that 'the three major administrative challenges on a campus are sex for the students, athletics for the alumni, and parking for

the faculty'. When he was forced to quit the University of California, caught in the crossfire between liberal students and conservative politicians, he said that 'I left the University just as I had entered it, fired with enthusiasm'.

But today we want to highlight these words from the Report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, which Clark Kerr chaired in the 1970s: *'Taking, as a starting point, 1530, when the Lutheran Church was founded, some 66 institutions that existed then still exist today in the Western world in recognisable forms: the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the parliaments of Iceland and the Isle of Man, and 62 universities... They have experienced wars, revolutions, depressions, and industrial transformations, and have come out less changed than almost any other segment of their societies.'*

One of the most thrilling moments of my own academic career was attending, in 1988, the 900th anniversary celebrations of the University of Bologna the oldest of those 62 universities. They invited all the world's university presidents to come and we paraded around the streets of the city in our academic gowns to the pealing of the bells of all the churches.

A year later, Bologna gave its name to the Bologna process. A unique regional higher education reform initiative, the Bologna Process was conceived, according to one witty author, as "a fast-fix for turning higher education in Europe into the most dynamic and attractive in the world". (Gilder & Wells, 2009)

The 1999 Bologna Declaration aimed at the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, the harmonization of the degree cycles and the introduction of quality assurance mechanisms. 46 Ministers of Higher Education from across the wider Europe subsequently signed it. 2010 was the target for reaching its objectives and the Bologna Process duly celebrated its success at a Ministerial Conference in that year, held symbolically in both Budapest and Vienna as an illustration of the re-unification of Europe. Stamenka participated as head of the UNESCO delegation, having also been an active participant in some of the Bologna Process developments.

It was celebration, yet, in hindsight, one can question what has really been achieved save a greater focus on higher education policy by a larger number of countries. It was no doubt an important achievement, but hardly a revolution. We both had experience as students of universities created soon after Bologna: Oxford and Paris. Those institutions feel like places that have changed in an evolutionary manner.

You don't hear talk about an historic upheaval when an older academic order went to the guillotine, although these universities have changed substantially over the centuries. The locus of internal control has steadily migrated. Oxford had its origins when students, some of whom had been expelled from the University of Paris for rowdy behaviour, rented houses together and then hired scholars to teach them. My own college, St. Edmund Hall, began as one of those medieval houses. Edmund Rich, later Archbishop of

Canterbury was one the scholars that the students gathered around. He is credited with the wise advice: 'learn as if you were going to live forever, and live as if you were going to die tomorrow'.

Pretty soon the locus of control moved from the students to these scholars, the fellows or dons of the halls and colleges. In universities like Oxford and Cambridge, it has pretty much stayed there ever since. In most other universities the locus of control has moved in the direction of academic administrators or even governments. But again, this has been a gradual process. We shall return to the issue of university management later.

Let us now mention briefly three other major developments in higher education, two in the 19th century and one in the 20th century. They also suggest evolution rather than revolution.

The Humboldtian University

In the early 1800s, Wilhelm von Humboldt urged that universities be more liberal and research focused than previously. Seminars and laboratories started to evolve because Humboldt envisioned university education as a student-centered activity of research. He expressed this by stating that: *"The university teacher is thus no longer a teacher and the student is no longer a pupil. Instead the student conducts research on his own behalf and the professor supervises his research and supports him in it."*

These were new ideas but they did not create a revolution. Certainly they had a big influence on universities in the US and in Britain – and had even loosened up the tightly controlled French system by the end of the 19th century – but this was evolution. I recognise my own undergraduate studies at Oxford in this quotation. Although at Oxford we students were firmly identified in Latin as being in *statu pupillari* and were not allowed to walk on the grass in the college quadrangle!

The Morrell Act: Land-Grant Colleges

Later in the 19th century, in 1862, the Morrell Act created the Land Grant colleges and universities in the United States. The Act enjoined these new institutions to focus on the teaching of practical agriculture, science, military science and engineering, although without excluding classical studies. It was a response to the industrial revolution and changing social class. Certainly this mission contrasted with the historic practice of higher education to focus on an abstract liberal arts curriculum but, once again, it was not a revolution.

Ultimately, most land-grant colleges became large public universities that today offer a full spectrum of educational opportunities. Some, such as Cornell and MIT, have become private schools. The bursting of the tuition fees bubble is having dire effects on some of these institutions today.

The Open University

Our example from the 20th century is the Open University. Here there was talk of revolution, but a revolution in their technological environment – not in universities *per se*. We sometimes assume that technology came into higher education with the Internet. But even by the 1960s, the blending of technologies had begun to offer universities a rich communications environment. At the foundation ceremony of the UK Open University in 1969 its Chancellor, Lord Crowther, captured this in these words: *"The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. Then the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second."*

It is hard to overstate the impact of the UK Open University in laying the groundwork for the use of technology in higher education. Established with strong political support, it attracted worldwide attention. The OU slogan 'open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas' encapsulates this.

Today the Open University has 250,000 enrolled students. Yet despite its size it ranks 5th, one place above Oxford, in national assessments of teaching quality. This slide is dated because in 2004 the elite universities, who hated to have the quality of their teaching assessed, pleaded successfully with Prime Minister Blair to stop it! Note also, and this is remarkable when you think about it, the Open University came top in last year's nation-wide assessment of students' satisfaction with their universities and it has never come lower than third in this annual survey of over 100 universities.

We conclude from the history of the Open University that we can use technology to deliver high-quality education to large numbers. Was it a revolution in higher education? We don't think so. Indeed, one wag remarked that the opening of the Open University had made Britain's other universities even more closed, because they felt relieved of any responsibility to worry about part-time and adult students.

Today, however, with all UK universities concerned about the implications of technology for their missions, the Open University is the organising force behind the UK's FutureLearn MOOCs initiative, in which it leads a consortium of the top 25 UK universities. We are both going to take a FutureLearn MOOC next month to find out if it really is setting a new standard for pedagogy.

We hope these examples have persuaded you that higher education does evolution, not revolution. However, evolving to find a suitable niche in a changing environment is at least as challenging as being swept along by a revolution. To this we now turn.

World Conference on Higher Education

In 2009 UNESCO held its 2nd decennial conference on Higher Education with the title *The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and*

Development. Stamenka was the Executive Secretary of the conference, which attracted 2000 delegates from nearly all countries of the world. We think the term 'new dynamics' is a good label for the changes occurring in the environments in which higher education operates.

The conference identified a set of such new dynamics, which are as relevant today as they were five years ago. The most salient dynamic in this list is the first: rising demand. We may consider the forecast of 100 million additional students in higher education by 2025 to be an exaggeration, but bear two things in mind. First, most previous predictions of enrolment growth have underestimated the later reality. Second, even if you trim the forecast significantly that's still a lot of new students. Rising demand is a major driver of the other new dynamics, notably the diversification of provision, the use of information technology and distance learning and the pressures on the academic profession.

Despite the diversification of provision it still seems that nearly half the coverage of higher education in the media concerns the so-called 'world-class universities'. Ranking these universities sells newspapers and magazines, although they represent barely 5% of the 25,000 higher education institutions worldwide. We shall say no more about them today because the other 95% of the sector may have more answers to the challenges facing higher education in today's environment.

What are those challenges?

Unemployment of young people

The numbers of young people who are not in employment, education or training, sometimes called NEETs, must be top of the list. Last year *The Economist* newspaper devoted a major article to this topic. It gave some alarming figures. This chart shows how many young people are neither employed nor in education or training by region. *The Economist* calculated that the world total of inactive young people is nearly 300 million – or one quarter of the world's youth. Yet at the same time employers complain that they cannot find graduates with the right skills and competences. There is a serious gap between education and the job market.

The article concluded that: "Policymakers know what to do to diminish the problem – ignite growth, break down cartels and build bridges between education and work. New technology gives them powerful tools too". Higher education must focus on two parts of this advice, building bridges between education and work and using some of these powerful tools that technology provides.

The remit of CHET includes training policy and we are most interested in your take on this crisis. Training is clearly part of the answer. But is it just a matter of expanding opportunities for training? Are the training policies of governments, business and industry flawed? Are the topics on which training is offered wide of the mark? Are

training courses too long? Are the ways that we recognise the outcomes of training inadequate? You have more answers to these questions than we do.

<u>Post-traditional higher education</u>

The qualifications that define the output of higher education are being put into new bottles. *The Economist* said that new technology provides powerful tools. New types of awards, such as Open Badges, are emerging. These badges, which are placed on the Web, carry more information about what was studied and how it was assessed than the usual university transcript. They allow learners to get recognition for short-cycle studies on economically relevant topics and to aggregate a series of badges into a conventional qualification such as a degree or a diploma. We would be interested in your views on the long-term significance of badges.

Stamenka and I are engaged in the interesting task of introducing open badges to China through our work with the DeTao Masters Academy. They seem to provide a useful way of recognising the outcomes of a variety of learning events, from a single Master Lecture, through an enriched practical track alongside a four-year programme in Film Animation, to post-university level workshops for professionals at the peak of their careers.

But open badges are just one example of way that new technology is opening up higher education on various dimensions. For want of a better term we call this set of new approaches 'post-traditional' higher education. Another example is the opening up of academic content through the multiplication of Open Educational Resources.

We were both centrally involved in the organisation of the World OER Congress in Paris in 2012 and in drafting the Paris Declaration on OER that came out of it. Its key paragraph, the punch line if you like, was to encourage the open licencing of educational materials produced with public funds. I am proud that our own Province followed up quickly by offering free, online open textbooks for the 40 most popular postsecondary courses. OER are multiplying steadily and an increasing number of jurisdictions are using them to reduce the price of textbooks in particular.

But even though their long-term significance is probably greater, Open Educational Resources have not captured the media's imagination as much as their by-product: MOOCs. OER were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion.

<u>Are MOOCs a revolution?</u>

As you know, a MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course. They dominated news coverage of higher education in 2012 and were widely hailed as a revolution.

We must give MIT credit for launching both OER and MOOCs. MIT created the concept of OER with its OpenCourseware project over a decade ago. Then in 2011 it also put MOOCs on the map, even though the term MOOC was first coined for a course offered free to the public in Canada in 2008. But MIT turned MOOCs into a craze. Let's look at its first offering.

With 155,000 registrations it was certainly **massive**; it was **open** in that it was free, but free as in free beer, not as in free speech. The materials in most US MOOCs are not explicitly open educational resources, so they are closed in that sense.

It was offered **online** worldwide.

Was it a **course**? Not really. If you took and passed all the automated tests, which very few learners did, you could pay for a certificate of completion but you certainly could not get credit to use in any regular programme at MIT.

That is the basic snag. In our view MOOCs are not a revolution. Indeed, they are not really higher education at all, because higher education is not just teaching and learning, but the awarding of useful credentials.

Such considerations have not, however, deterred a stampede of institutions from join the mooing MOOC herd. This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea of why they are offering MOOCs. There is a failure of leadership. A senior officer at MIT told me last year that she kept asking her colleagues why they were doing MOOCs and no one could give her a cogent answer.

Professor Tony Bates, your ex-Director of Distance Learning and perhaps the world's most respected blogger on educational technology, predicts a shake out in MOOCs this year as evaluation results come in and financial officers start to ask harder questions about cost and benefit. So far there is no business model for MOOCs and this is becoming a problem.

Meanwhile, with so many providers piling in to offer them, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker remarked that every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable. But in terms of the global economic and youth unemployment crises, this diversification is good. As MOOCs multiply they could reinforce some helpful trends. Many of those taking the first MOOCs already had university degrees, so they provided informal professional development for well-qualified people. Two things are needed to make MOOCs more useful. First, we need MOOCs in employment related topics at all levels. Second, people need credible qualifications for successful study.

Both are happening. The range of topics is diversifying fast and various bodies are giving recognition for MOOCs, even where they did not offer the course themselves. Open Badges are coming into play too. This is an example of the

wider trend of the 'unbundling' of higher education, with different organisations handling different parts of the process.

Let us note three evolutionary trends that are being accelerated by MOOCs.

The first is the move to online learning. Until recently online learning, like the rest of distance learning, was thought to be of low quality. This was often simply a dogmatic belief held by traditionalists. But today, the rush of Harvard, MIT, Stanford and company into online learning has finally shaken the old belief that distance learning is inferior. Online teaching and learning is now central to the future of universities.

The second trend is towards shorter courses. Online courses work best – that is to say students succeed better – if they are between five and six weeks in duration. This favours intense concentration on a particular topic.

We have already touched on the third evolutionary trend, which is the appearance of new qualifications to respond to the focus on employment and shorter course lengths.

So what is needed to help higher education evolve effectively in these turbulent times? We urge attention to two areas: research on higher education and institutional leadership.

Research on higher education

Given its size and scope, the global higher education enterprise generates only a tiny amount of research on its own activity. We compliment CHET on being part of that endeavour but we believe that much more is needed to help institutions and governments steer through this time of turbulence. CHET is part of a network of higher education research centres around the world.

A meeting in China last November brought such centres together for the first time with the aim of developing a global network. The meeting was a response to the need for "thinking capacity," data, policy analysis, and professional training for tertiary education worldwide. The meeting issued *The Shanghai Statement,* which urged that: "both institutions and systems, faced with a myriad of challenges and crises, require thoughtful leadership and data-based analysis. We can no longer rely on amateur management and *ad hoc* solutions to unprecedented problems."

Leadership

We conclude with some remarks about leadership in this turbulent world of higher education. Having spent nearly thirty years in and around the leadership of universities, we are pleased to note that research does show that a key determinant of the quality and impact of institutions is the quality of their leaders.

We don't make a sharp distinction between leadership and management. For us leadership, management and administration are all part of a whole. All members of a university community have to exercise each of these roles at one time or another. Institutions have to try to be good at all three, because weaknesses in any one of them will undermine the effectiveness of the others.

Good universities are challenging organisations to lead, manage and administer because they are composed of intelligent and relatively autonomous knowledge workers. Twenty years ago the heads of commercial enterprises scorned university managers as soft and consensual but today, as all businesses rely more on knowledge workers, business people understand that good universities can be leaders in 21st century management practice. The bad news for autocratic leaders is that bright people ask intelligent and hard questions. The good news is that bright people develop good solutions to problems.

The task of university leadership is to create a sense of common purpose, which we call a strategy. In a university full of bright people, developing a good strategy means paying attention to both content and process. We find a simple quadrant helpful for illustrating this. First, regarding the content of the strategy, you can have good strategies and poor strategies. Second, you need a process that makes the people in the university feel that they own the strategy.

Your aim, therefore, is a strategy that fits in the first box: a good strategy that the university community owns. You want to avoid box 4: a poor strategy with low ownership. But the most likely risk in a university is that you find yourselves in boxes 2 or 3. Box 2 may be a good strategy but the university feels no ownership of it. It is often called a consultant's strategy – having been conceived outside the institution. The staff's motivation for implementing it will be low. On the other hand, box 3 is a strategy developed within the university. It has high ownership but it is a poor strategy, probably because of too much groupthink. Hard choices were avoided in favour of compromise and mutual backscratching so no one will be inconvenienced.

How do you achieve a strategy in Box 1? In our experience you do it by collaborative leadership that combines bottom-up and top-down planning. From the top you must inspire the university with a vision of its future that fits the fast-changing technological environment. But you must also have a participative planning process that allows the university community to build a structure on the foundation of that vision.

It can be done. I believe that we achieved something like this in the UK Open University in the 1990s, thanks in good measure to the work of my Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Strategy, Geoff Peters, who was brilliant at making top-down and bottom-up meet. In that decade we doubled enrolment from 100,000 to 200,000 students and put £100 million of reserves in the bank. The stellar success of the Open University today, as the world's leading online university, suggests that those plans were a solid foundation for a new generation of technology.

We would also add that this combination of bottom-up and top-down processes is also the only way of creating a culture of quality within a university, because it gives people pride in achieving the goals that they have helped to articulate.

Conclusion

So, Colleagues, we conclude that higher education will only avoid the failures of leadership that we have mentioned by rediscovering collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership lessens the risk that institutions will fail because of comfortable groupthink by the faculty or irrational decisions by presidents following the herd of their fellow presidents. Collaborative leadership, through planning that combines bottom-up and top-down processes, can harness technological innovation and allow universities to adapt to the 21st century environment.

Reference

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