

#### **Session 4: Workshop 3**

**Title:** A lesson from America – The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World

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**Chair:** Professor John Quelch, Dean, London Business School, UK

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#### *About the Project*

The Futures Project was initiated in 1999 to provide guidance for institutional leaders in understanding the policy implications necessary to respond to the global growth in new providers, new technologies and shifting demographics. The project aims to stimulate informed policy debate about the role of the higher education sector in a growing global society. It achieves this through undertaking and publishing research on a wide variety of topics and through facilitating debate with policy leaders in government, institutionally and across various communities.

#### *The Growth in Virtual Providers*

One key message from the Project, and the focus for the presentation, is that virtual providers in higher education (both public and private) are growing; and at a rate much faster than initially anticipated. The project has undertaken a number of surveys to begin to track the trends and developments. Through its work a series of studies has been undertaken to begin to provide empirical evidence of the speed and scope of developments in virtual learning. The findings suggest that even those estimates that were considered to be wildly exaggerated two to three years ago have proven to be quite conservative as the use of technology in higher education explodes globally.

One such example of the incredible growth is the Community Colleges in Colorado that decided to create a virtual college for that region. In the first year the enrolment was 300 students, in the second year 700 students, in the third 1,200 students and currently it enrolls over 6,000 students from the region and across the globe. The message: by the nature of virtuality all providers become the competition.

#### *The Impact of Technology on Learning*

The project explores the impact of technology, in particular the impact in the classroom where software can be used to transform the learning experience. Newman suggests that within the next seven years there will be a major change in how we use technology in the classroom. Technology will not only impact *how* students learn but will begin to generate a real enthusiasm for the learning experience to make it both more exciting and more effective. Students continue to be increasingly sophisticated in their ability to use computers and technology with the end result that at the moment

there is a certain level of competitiveness at times between the students and faculty members as the faculty find themselves no longer in a position of power but having to take on a different role of facilitator of learning. As students continue to grow in sophistication they will also develop different *ways of learning and thinking* which means that a different kind of pedagogical approach will be needed.

### *The Implications of Competition (not least from “squirreling students”)*

The project has found that in the US students are taking courses from a number of different institutions – known as ‘squirreling students’. A recent study at one institution found that 24% of the students were taking a course from another institution. In some instances, university graduates are going to community colleges to get different skills which adds a competitive pressure. Many universities do certain things poorly (eg introductory maths courses) so students look for different venues to take the courses. They literally shop via the internet to find where they can get the ‘best’ courses. Such behaviour adds to the propensity to buy learning in ‘bits’ and not have students buying into the totality of the ‘student experience’ in any one institution. Although there is evidence of this in the US, Europe (and other countries) can ill afford to ignore these developments as they will be driven by the market regardless of the basic cultural differences.

There are many implications to this increased competition and enhanced potential to improve pedagogy. One implication centres on efficiency gains – there is always pressure to do more for less money. An entrepreneurial approach is necessary to ensure that the institution and the student are getting value for money both educationally and from a quality standpoint.

Another implication centres around unrestrained competition. As institutions become more aggressive in recruiting students not only in their local geographic area but also more widely then ‘useful’ institutions begin to lose out. For example, Penn State University has initiated ‘Penn State World Campus’ and established a virtual presence as well as a series of sub-campuses around the state. The net result is that the smaller, more ‘useful’ colleges are beginning to have difficulty recruiting. The more competitive institutions tend to focus on ‘better students’ than on access issues and social mobility. The outcome will be that the less advantaged students will end up in poorer institutions.

### *Possible Institutional Responses*

Newman sees two possible responses by institutional leaders to these developments. First, to assemble as much evidence as possible on the assumption that evidence will help identify trends and provide concrete cases of what is taking place and then to make decisions on the evidence. The second approach is to wait until the market forces begin to drive change which often sees a rapid swing in activities. The difficulty with the latter is that if you wait too long to act then existing policy is difficult to change and the institution is unable to respond quickly enough to the dramatic swing in activity.

The capability of faculty to work with the new technologies is a key area that must be considered. Older faculty are not changing their teaching methods quickly enough to

effect any real change. Staff turn-over may provide a different breed of faculty as the younger, more “technology savvy” academics come on stream. The question is, can institutions invest in adequate technology for the staff to use before they fall into the old habit of lecturing? The necessary investment in technology is considerable with roughly between four and seven per cent of the institutional annual budget spent on technology in the US. It is getting cheaper, better, faster and more reliable. However, the reward for academic scholarship is skewed at the moment with far higher reward for excellence in research than in teaching – this tends to draw the academics away from committing time and effort to develop technology enhanced learning. Newman believes that competitive forces will eventually put enough pressure to change the reward system as students begin to demand more interactive, technology-based learning.

### *The Way Forward*

Skilled institutional leadership is necessary to facilitate the strategic management of significant change to address these developments. These developments will bring a fundamental change that will effect the way that institutions are organised. Institutions will need to identify a specific focus and not attempt to be ‘all things to all people’. Academic leaders will need to rationalise and focus and shed those programmes that are redundant and no longer relevant to the institution and its community’s needs. The institution’s particular advantage in the marketplace needs to be determined – to identify the niche that makes is special and to pursue that activity to ensure that an approach is taken that enables the institution to ‘stand above the crowd’.

The development of institutional policy is critical to success. Concern about access is important as the pressure to compete for the better students puts pressure on continued social mobility and affordable education for all. Quality is another concern: when students are taking courses at multiple locations it means that the traditional learning process is not in place. We need better ways of measuring learner outcomes including increased transparency in terms of process and costs. Policy should also encourage the ‘broader skills’ in citizenship and service to society. Knowledge and skills have to be put to society’s use; this argues for institutions to continue to champion the controversial subjects and to continue to be the conscience of society and not to focus too narrowly on the vocational.

### *A Serious Concern...*

A serious concern is that institutions of higher education lose the special status of the ‘conscience of society’ as they become more market driven with the example of corporately sponsored research driving the agenda. Part of the problem rests in defining a degree as ‘workforce skills’ and in so doing, losing the notion of ‘society and citizenry’. If, indeed, the notion of liberal education is lost sight of in this new mode, and if the market is left to its own forces, it could lead to a very narrow education focussed on workplace skills. The problem with the argument is that it is fundamentally flawed as it is more rhetorical than practical – we say we want self-actuated learners and yet we lecture to the students; or we ask for creativity and then focus on narrow skills.

### *Regulatory Issues*

Regulatory issues are complex. For the most part, regulations are there to protect learners/students and not the institutions. Academic leaders began by demanding that government protect their institution's position and fend off unwanted competition, but this is beginning to change as the institutional leaders are shifting from a desire for protection to a call for deregulation in order to enable them to compete. In some countries the regulatory mechanism does not fit the distance learning mode as the current criteria for funding include the amount of land occupied and the numbers of books in the library. What is necessary is a knowledgeable interaction between academics and government in relation to deregulation, performance funding and market forces. What may be necessary is to educate the regulators to see learning in different ways so that conformity to local mechanisms does not distort the possibility to participate and compete.

Developments in virtual education are not polar – it is not the case of ‘*either virtual or traditional*’ provision. Instead a mixed mode is more predominant, with institutions developing a mixture of face-to-face and technology enhanced instruction. The opportunity is there to use the new technologies to do what the rhetoric of access and higher education are all about – the question is: will we do it?

For further information: [www.futuresproject.org](http://www.futuresproject.org)