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### Beyond the Shadows: Strategic Divergence and Uncharted Waters for Universities

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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

## **Beyond the Shadows: Strategic Divergence and Uncharted Waters for Universities**

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### **Abstract**

Institutions will not only look different 2050 – they must be different in design, mission, foci and culture. Differentiation will be a competitive advantage. Institutions need faster decision making processes that engage all stakeholder groups and reflect sound judgment. Leadership, agility, and adaptation are the key attributes for institutions to respond to any emerging changes in market conditions, crises, and society in the future. This is a proactive repositioning rather than the naïve mindset of striving for reactive rhetoric of future proofing. Institutions must stay connected with their local markets, constituencies and take responsibility for helping all of these be successful and embrace both excellence and access as part of scaling new strategic opportunities such as Massive Digital Hybrid Learning (MDHL). Universities will need to realign their geopolitical roles in society, preserve and advocate for democracy, human rights, freedom, justice, and ethical and moral uses of digital technologies, particularly social media. A.I. represents an augmentation of human intelligence and creativity not a replacement for human beings. We end where we should always begin in education and that is with optimism and hope. Hope is a belief in the possible and the possibilities for universities in the future are unlimited if we work together collectively to improve the human condition, open the educational doors of access to everyone, and embrace the democratic ideals of human rights, equality and justice and serve as a voice for freedom and peace.

## Keywords

Leadership, strategic reset, hope, massive digital hybrid learning, agility, adaptation, unlearning

## Introduction

*. . . society as a whole, politicians and policy makers in particular, are insufficiently ambitious about what different sorts of universities could be. If you are not looking like a medieval theme park, then you are [judged as] in some way failing as an institution (Husbands, 2023, p. 2).*

Indeed, higher education is at a crossroads. The choices university leaders make now will determine what their institutions become, their value to the public and society, and the market differentiation factors that provide institutional competitive advantage in a highly diverse and crowded HEI market. Strategic reset – taking one’s university in new directions, refitting for the future, and exploring uncharted waters – is possible and perhaps essential for universities to thrive and survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (McGreal & Olcott, 2022).

Conversely, the challenges endemic to the 21<sup>st</sup> century of a rapidly changing global landscape characterised by uncertainty and change are complex and often come with risks for university leaders (Brown, 2023). A brave new world is simply inspiring rhetoric – translating it in to practice is quite another story. Leadership, design, agility and adaptation are the keys for future institutions. Future proofing is a myth and essentially a reactive process that lacks predictable precision.

University business as usual is simply not business as usual. The post-pandemic educational ‘Zeitgeist’ is characterised by declining funding to higher education, increased student demand for credentials leading to employment such as emerging micro-credentials; increasing geopolitical populist right-wing governments that are questionable allies for universities and often hostile to protecting human rights; online delivery which is normative for most institutions, and A.I. innovations that are challenging many of our traditional assumptions about what we do, how we do it,

who should do it and how this will define the destiny of what university teaching, learning, and research will become.

Moreover, one of the biggest casualties of this global HE transformation is the historical decision making mantra of the modern university – *deliberation, consensus and incremental implementation*. This process is admirable and linked to many core values cherished and preserved for centuries that embrace open discussion, diversity of views, and the collegiality to the world. Regrettably, this process is obsolete and is simply too slow to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. A new decision making matrix is needed in a market where leaders are trying to respond to moving targets in the environment whilst they are moving themselves.

The central thematic imperatives of this article are stated in this introduction Institutions will not only look different 2050 – they must be different in design, mission, foci and culture. Institutions need faster decision making and implementation processes that engage all stakeholder groups and reflect sound judgment. Leaders must worry less about reactive future proofing and rather focus on enhancing proactive institutional agility and adaptability capable of responding to any emerging changes in market conditions, crises, and society. Strategic reset can be a powerful architecture for institutions to stay connected with their local markets, constituencies and take responsibility for helping all of these be successful (Crow, 2023). A lesson here is leading from the margins and the shadows is not a viable role of universities nor its leaders as we progress towards 2050.

As a descriptive speculative- reflective analysis defined for this special issue by the guest editors, this does not and should not suggest that empiricism and research design considerations should not be discussed. All of the above topics whilst evidenced by scholarly research and literature, can still offer potential suggestions for future research and supporting commentary, including delimitations of researching some of these topics. This author will attempt to supplement this ‘Blue Sky’ article by stating it is my greatest ‘hope’ that we will return to home field empiricism to delve in to these research questions well ahead of 2050. The big ‘blue sky’ descriptive research questions of this descriptive-speculative analysis are:

1. What are key issues and strategies that universities will need to address to differentiate themselves in the market and ensure the capacity of their institution to be agile, adaptive and competitive in 2050?
2. What specific research questions linked to these issues and strategies will complement and empower institutional reset for the future?

### **Purpose and Scope**

The central theme of this article is that future universities must reflect the diversity and needs of a rapidly changing society rather than the historic model where universities general look similar across the sector in their offerings, policies, performance indicators, and to some degree philosophical and political norms. Universities not only should look different – they must be different. Universities must emerge from the shadows and embrace their own brave new worlds. This is an imperative and is not optional and will be the difference between thriving or just surviving in 2050.

Indeed, this was the underlying argument of Sir Chris Husband's (2023) quote that opened this article. In essence, he argues that if universities are going to build the talents of a diverse population, universities will need diverse performance indicators, diverse delivery modalities, and diverse blends of innovations to harness the talents of its students, partners and communities.

This article will explore a tapestry of emerging opportunity strategies for universities of the future. The article is not about a silver bullet model for the future nor about proposing a rhetoric driven dialogue for future proofing universities. We will come back to this Orwellian doublespeak about future proofing later in the paper.

The article begins with a snapshot of the current global landscape and some of the key factors that will impact university futures. This will be followed by a critical discussion of why universities must emerge from the shadows in building their futures and what this means in a practical sense.

The next section is the crux of this article: Strategic Reset for Unchartered Waters: Challenges and Opportunities. It provides preliminary views on the blue sky research questions stated in the introduction. It will offer a broad spectrum of vantage points. We will explore the dynamic crossroads of what universities might look like

in the future; how justice, hope, human rights, educational technologies, and a reframing of institutional roles can collectively create agile and adaptable institutions that are defined by flexible and courageous leadership, service models that reflect their local social and political situations within society. This section will cover the following:

- Strategic reset
- Digital technologies and A.I.
- University geopolitical realignment
- Leadership, agility, adaptation
- A belief in the possible: hope
- Freedom, human rights, and justice
- Massive Hybrid Digital Learning

This 2050 university will be invested in community outcomes and performance in concert with its own performance indicators. The university will be defined by who it includes rather than who it excludes and research will be measured based on its benefits for the public. Finally, excellence and access will co-exist as the central mission of the university (Crow, 2023). The article concludes with a brief summary.

### **Setting the Stage: The Global Landscape for Higher Education**

Today, climate change, digitalisation, populism, geopolitical shifts and power realignments, artificial intelligence and global economic downturns are just a few of forces that suggest that a massive perfect storm has hit HE (Brown, 2023; Lindsey 2020, 2021, & 2022; Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023).

Indeed, a single new normal never emerged from the pandemic; rather many *new normals* evolving across societal institutions reflective of different norms, cultures, and practices. In sum, global HE has unprecedented challenges ahead and there is no single silver bullet solution. So where does this leave strategic reset in 2024? Perhaps the best place to start is to briefly review Table 1 (Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2022, p. 76) that summarised key challenges facing the higher education sector.

At first glance, perhaps the most glaring revelation from Table 1 is that business as usual and/or returning to pre-pandemic norms is unlikely. New institutional architectures are needed to navigate this complex web of trends, change, and

innovation. Although a detailed discussion of each of these three broad areas and their characteristics is beyond this paper, the *main point* is to illustrate the challenging task leaders confront in reframing strategic reset for their institutions post-pandemic. And whilst these moving targets will require leaders to be moving simultaneously, it is common sense that different priorities will emerge for different institutions and for different reasons and purposes. Indeed, one size does not and will not fit all.

The global trends that are front and centre are the Israeli-Hamas war in Gaza, the Ukrainian-Russia War, the geo-political shifts towards right-wing populist governments, economic downturns due to the pandemic, climate change, south to north migration, a growing disparity between the have and have nots, an expanding rather than contracting digital divide particularly between the developed and developing world, energy and food shortages, and global realignment of political/milita.

Table 1

Global Mega-Trends	HE / Covid-19 / Online Education	4IR (Revolution)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ukrainian War</li> <li>• Recession</li> <li>• Energy crisis</li> <li>• Nationalism</li> <li>• Digital divide</li> <li>• Economic recession</li> <li>• Decreased public funding</li> <li>• Competition</li> <li>• New global regionalism</li> <li>• Shifts in global economic powers</li> <li>• Climate change</li> <li>• Migration from Global South to Global North</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online growth</li> <li>• Lack of preparedness</li> <li>• Lack of support services</li> <li>• Mission ambiguity</li> <li>• Leadership development</li> <li>• New pedagogical models</li> <li>• Micro-credentials</li> <li>• Need for faculty training</li> <li>• Contingency planning</li> <li>• Inequitable access to technology</li> <li>• New stakeholder relationships</li> <li>• Data ethics</li> <li>• Digital equity and inclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced digitalisation and automation</li> <li>• Job creation – job loss</li> <li>• Employee mobility</li> <li>• Integration and horizontal seamless business models</li> <li>• Constant skill upgrading</li> <li>• Continual diversification</li> <li>• Differentiation</li> <li>• Artificial intelligence</li> </ul>

Global Mega-Trends/HE-Covid-19/Online Education/4th IR (Revolution blocks – NATO, China-India-Russia-North Korea, and regional alliances (Menon Castrillon, 2019; Penprase, 2018; Lindsey, 2020, 2021, & 2022).

How was higher education impacted by the pandemic? Brown (2023) noted that 1) online learning facilitated access to university learning for those affected by campus closures; 2) ODL served as an example of new digital models of learning to expand access and 3) at minimum online delivery is at the very least an option for schools and universities. Whether or not online delivery is strongly embedded in the

mainstream educational culture at all levels, we probably need to proceed with caution. The jury is still out for many schools and universities.

The glaring fact is online delivery was the only option available rather than closing down schools and universities during the pandemic. A celebration of the brave new world of immersive online learning is premature and only time will tell the level of adoption (Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023). The pandemic also brought international education and mobility to a standstill and many institutions across the globe dependent upon revenues from international students are still facing major economic challenges.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution whilst still somewhat difficult to decipher in its entirety, has arrived under the guise of the A.I. Revolution. A.I. is not new but its awareness amongst the masses as a potential global gamechanger exploded in 2023. Schafer (2018) argues that the defining characteristic of the 4<sup>th</sup> IR is the exponential increase in computer power. The second characteristic which complicates strategic reset is disruption. The vast new technologies, A.I., and rapid race by all sectors to take the A.I. lead disrupts normal delivery and production cycles and leaves leaders perplexed with setting priorities and making decisions inclusive of sound judgment and competitive advantage.

The United Nations (2022) reported that the effects of the global pandemic and Ukrainian-Russian war would drive nearly 100 million additional people into extreme poverty. It is likely that this is increase due the Israeli-Hamas conflict in Gaza. Moreover, climate change and its impacts on forced migration would force another 130 million people in to poverty. Today, right this moment, 800 million people are going hungry on this planet. These numbers are staggering. The UN Report also revealed an unfathomable statistic – the world's 26 richest people own as much wealth as half the world's population.

The pandemic also revealed some other disconcerting facts. The digital divide appears to be increasing rather than decreasing. Francis & Weller (2021) also reported that in the U.S. during the pandemic wealth inequalities resulted in less access to reliable Internet, digital devices, and housing instability for African American and Hispanic/Latinio households. Stated more succinctly, less money correlates to reduced opportunities to participate equally in the educational process



which in turn means teaching and learning is not a level playing field due to wealth disparities. This type of wealth inequality is well documented in the developing world, Sub-Saharan Africa in particular (Hülsmann, 2016).

In sum, this is just a glimpse of the complexities illustrated in Table 1 above. University leaders are confronted with a rapidly changing and fluid HE environment where focus, judgment and patience will all be required to create flexible and agile organisations for the future. Like Margaret Mitchell's famous novel, business as usual in the modern university is *Gone with the Wind*. We can't go back - only forward.

### **Beyond the Shadows: Shifting University Roles**

Indeed, one of the most perplexing dichotomies within the HEI leadership spectrum throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was that universities and their leaders *lived in the shadows*. For the most part, institutions and their leaders minded their own business, managed their own house, and stayed clear of the geopolitical arena. Better to be neutral, out of the fray, than to take a side even when the right side was self-evident. Most leaders preferred to be left alone, inside the bubble, in their own controlled worlds. Many institutions, indeed, followed the elitist Ivory Tower trek to shield themselves from undue outside influence and to selectively engage in low-moderate risk endeavours aligned with institutional mission and tradition.

Most university presidents pursued this strategy to remain in the shadows and to solidify their legacies for future generations to admire. There were exceptions and the pendulum from time to time would require institutions and their leaders to fall in line, meet the bureaucratic and value norms of funders, governments, and even external partners. In some respects, external bodies such as accrediting agencies, government funders, and even socially responsible students and faculty preferred this life in the shadows.

Afterall, it is easier to stay neutral and stand on the sidelines than engage in causes that were indelibly right and just. The Ivory Tower truly was an elitist ivory entity in every sense, immune to most outside influences, and parochial in most of its essential functions. Leaders managed – they did not lead (Burns, 1978; Kotter, 2012; Mintzberg, 1975) A lesson here is leading from the margins and the shadows is not a

viable role of universities nor its leaders as we progress towards 2050. Accountability in all its guises has hit the mainstream academy and those who survive beyond 2025. Strategic reset presented in this article suggests that leaders must not function from the shadows going forward. The stakes are too high. Climate change, wars of aggression, individual freedoms, human rights, economic and digital divides cannot be addressed in full with university leaders choosing to stay on the sidelines, in the shadows, neutral and naïve (Olcott, Arnold & Blaschke, 2023).

Leaders must rethink their strategic directions and accept that business as usual in the HE world will be detrimental to the future of their institutions. Your competitors will reframe their institutions with new architectures and streamlined strategic priorities to ensure focus, agility, and responsiveness to highly complex market forces. Competition will drive your institution off the playing field unless your step back, reset, engage, come out of the shadows to pursue that vision of your institution that will thrive in the future. The choice is yours.

### **Strategic Reset for Unchartered Waters: Challenges and Opportunities.**

#### **Strategic Reset**

McGreal & Olcott (2022) presented as part of their comprehensive work on micro-credentials the concept of Strategic Reset. This refers to institutions using the unforeseen onset of the global pandemic to pause, reframe their missions and key priorities, and set sail in new institutional directions for the future. A central theme of this article is institutions must look differently and more importantly, they must be different in the future. Strategic reset is a metaphor for looking in the mirror and reflecting what needs to change, what do we need to discard at this university, and what do we replace these with for the future – to thrive not just survive.

As Husbands (2023) reminds us in the opening quote, institutions are meant to all look and be the same thing and that is exactly the higher education system that we generally have across the planet with a few exceptions. Universities in the future cannot be all things to all people, all have the same programmes, all do the same things and all embracing the fatal flaw that doing what your competitors do is being innovative. In many instances its leaders can empower innovation to be effective in very local, subtle, and diverse ways rather than rolling out the band to celebrate to

the world we will do A.I. Your local community and stakeholders may not want or need A.I. Here are a few realities that institutional futures must consider:

- The majority of universities in the world are dual mode institutions. This means online, open and distance learning are add-ons to what started as traditional f2f institutions. These institutions are not and will not desire to become open universities. This means the online delivery must be tactical – used in ways that truly maximize the strengths of the institutional academic arsenal to serve its key stakeholders.
- All universities **do not** need to invest in open content, micro-credentials, international delivery, and other initiatives. Leaders must create a synergy that is right for their institution and the fact is the institution's footprint tends to be local and regional. Online delivery can go anywhere in the world and yet the vast majority of ODL is local and regional even amongst most open universities.

These two examples are just the tip of the iceberg for strategic reset. As institutions begin to focus locally and regionally – which in fact is what they should be doing anyway – they begin to build an institution that does look different and is different and can compete. Strategic reset does not mean institutions will not compete in certain areas. It means institutions will also engage in very different areas that differentiates them in the marketplace. The only outcome trying to be all things to all people accomplishes is it leads to mediocrity.

### **Digital Technologies and A.I.**

Digitalization and A.I. are normative features of the emerging HE landscape. Common sense suggests all institutions, to some degree, will be transformed in the future by digital technologies and even unknown affordances of A.I. What are the implications of this? The main lesson is online delivery and digitalization is, and will continue, to be normative features of the HEI landscape.

Going online will not differentiate your university in the marketplace (Olcott 2023; Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023). Every institution will be online so your leadership team must identify key attributes that will give your programmes, services, and student opportunities a better synergy than your competitors. What might these be?

Flexible scheduling, cost, availability of student aid, reliable access and timeliness to support services for both students and faculty; opportunities for students to co-create content, and more.

As well as online learning being normative for the vast majority of institutions, institutions must build digital synergies. What does this mean? It essentially is a function of institutional design and functions – how the university is organized. The digital arsenal needs to be brought together – online delivery, OERs, micro-credentials, faculty training, student services, etc., in short everything that links to digital services (McGreal & Olcott, 2022). Universities are infamous for duplicating systems and expenditures (this author once worked at a major university that had 6 LMS systems operating at the same time) without creating the best synergy of delivery, cost and staffing efficiencies.

A micro comment on A.I. for the future. The minute A.I. starts replacing the authentic creative and innovative spirit and magic of human beings in areas such as music, the arts, novels, film, and basic human communications and relationships - we as educators will have failed humanity and taken away rather than contributed to the human condition.

### **University Geopolitical Realignment**

An interconnected element of the premise universities must come out of the shadows and actively engage in the complex and uncomfortable realities of the world is universities must make choices about critical geopolitical issues. If universities do not speak out on social and political issues of right versus wrong, good versus evil, wars, human inequities, and more, what does this say about the moral and ethical foundations of the modern university? Moreover, this is not an issue of universities taking political sides at the macro political level, it means taking sides on societal issues and demands that leaders lend their voices. Silence is not always golden, indeed.

The current Israeli-Hamas war is a perfect example. Students protest but leaders are silent until their interests are at stake (Alonso<sup>1</sup>, 2023). Any ethical and moral human being would condemn the crimes against humanity acts by Hamas against Israeli civilians on 7 October resulting in over 1400 deaths. Conversely, the same human beings would conclude that the constant bombing of Palestinian civilians in the Gaza strip are equally crimes against humanity and leading to what could be come the biggest humanitarian crisis in human history (over 7000 deaths as of 27 October).

Where were/are the voices of discontent by university leaders and secretary generals/presidents of professional associations that serve professionals in educational technologies, online learning, and educational in general? During this conflict, social media and digital tools have been used as weapons of terror and for the distribution of biased and misinformation by mainstream media organization such as CNN, BBC, and the CNBC.

Silence and neutrality only help the oppressor. We know this from history and if university leaders do not stand up for justice, freedom, equity, equality, human rights, and stand against crimes against humanity, war crimes, discrimination, hate speech, and disinformation simply because these are complex, emotive and uncomfortable issues, do we create 21<sup>st</sup> century universities led by leaders who prefer to remain silent and in the shadows?

### **Leadership, Agility and Adaptation**

Dynamic leadership, agility and adaptation are actually the critical attributes that serve as a genuine metaphor for the future proofing sound bite. The concept of future proofing universities against the winds of change, competition, and political-economic shifts is just plain daft. With all our data analytics, A.I., and access to more information and knowledge than at any time in human history, we are simply not that smart as a species.

Leaders are increasingly coming to grips with the fact that for all the predictive capacity of a university's arsenal of research and empiricism, our predictive abilities

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/free-speech/2023/10/11/universities-slow-responses-hamas-attacks-draw-scrutiny>

are limited. The pandemic, global effects of the Ukrainian-Russian War and climate change illustrate this fact only too well. Moreover, the global HE community has generally agreed that the future is not predictable, universities are strategically misaligned with the needs of students, employers and society; and major trends and shifts in the global landscape that began nearly a decade ago and were accentuated during the global pandemic have amplified the need for innovative new university architectures (Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023).

Strategic reset will manifest itself much differently in developed and developing world universities and each leader must navigate the existing *Zeitgeist* – prevailing societal norms and realities –to effectively lead his or her institution (Daniels, 2023; Makoe & Olcott, 2021). Institutional agility and adaptation is a function of design. *This means that the institutional resources and culture are malleable and flexible enough to shift and respond to any change of circumstances, societal trends and economic downturns- global crises.* And, creating agility and adaptation is proactive and underpinning this approach is the belief, hope and confidence that we as an institution can meet and respond to any challenge. Future proofing is reactive, defensive and focuses on threats, not opportunities.

Finally, institutional agility and adaptation are also going to be a function of leadership. This means we will need very astute leaders whose vision for the future can reshape the culture and core values of the institution. Great leaders view every situation as an opportunity and agility, flexibility and adaptive mantras for future universities will require an almost magical leadership.

### **A Belief in the Possible: Hope**

*One of the tasks of the progressive educator is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be (Freire, 2004, p. 9).*

Hope is a belief in the possible. We often hear variations on the word such as hope is not a strategy; let's hope for the best but plan for the worst and many others. However, at the heart of this precious gift is the underlying and indelible belief that a

task, a redemption and even against all odds that with hope something genuine and often magical is possible (Yotsidi et al., 2018),

Again, Freire (2004) reminds us that as an educational approach, hope must be embedded in an understanding of current social and political situations within society. Indeed, change is possible in Freire's view but requires an 'intersection' and engagement with the issues to explore what is possible and the possibilities.

Paradoxically, sometimes the situation starts with the extremes that lead us to pursue and embrace hope (Bourne, 2021). Imagine human crises and issues that drive people to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness – climate change, war, poverty and others. Are the elderly, women and children feeling a loss of hope in Gaza today, 27 October 2023. The bombs continue to reign down and hopelessness and helplessness and the possible that hope can bring is slowly evaporating. When hope begins to disappear, it is replaced by hopelessness and helplessness and ultimately a resignation that hope has left the building. Although it is beyond this discussion to go in to a detailed discussion about similarities and differences between hope and faith, suffice to say hope is impacted positively by human action. Faith is a pure belief system that exists in an almost existential way.

Where does this leave hope in the context and practice of education? First and foremost, as educators we should aspire to follow Freire's ideas that we should inspire hope – the possible – in all situations no matter how dire. We don't just abandon hope when we cannot deliver digital technologies, food, clean water, healthcare, new laptops, high-speed Internet to nations in Sub-Saharan Africa. We could quit, turn our backs on these difficult situations or we can embody a courageous spirit that echoes yes that these issues are complicated but education, compassion, and hope can make a difference. Solutions are possible. Any educator who cannot find hope in their day-to-day work and create new possibilities for the future should find another line of work.

### **Democracy, Human Rights and Justice**

Indeed, there are numerous examples of recent populist geopolitical shifts across the world where right-wing governments have come to power and within weeks, freedom, human rights, democratic ideals and justice are threatened and under

siege. Democracy and human rights are interconnected and humans rights protect the interests of individuals even when they are not in the majority (Kirchschaeger, 2014; Payandeh, 2019).

This can be confusing because the essence of democracy is that the majority rules. However, when the majority of the governing are extreme right wing then human rights and freedoms are at risk. Moreover, justice which aspires to ensure equal protections under the law for all citizens regardless of political, economic, social, cultural, or religious views becomes untenable when fundamental freedoms and human rights are restricted. The protection of all human rights, in fact, is the precursor for ensuring an open, transparent and moral democracy (Kirchsclaeger, 2014).

The intersection of hope, democracy, human rights and justice often overlap. If we return to the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis in Gaza, it is clear democracy is not, and has not, really been functional for many years. Human rights have been curtailed, hope is gradually turning to hopelessness and helplessness, and justice has become a fragmented concept similar to the rubble of the bombed out buildings in Gaza. This is just one example of a situation where these concepts emerge. We have seen similar blurring and erosion of these democratic principles in many countries – Russia, China, Poland, Italy, the U.S., and many more. The key lesson here for us in education is that democracy, freedom, human rights, and justice is an interconnected synergy – when one is under threat, all are under threat.

Finally, it is important for us to remember that the modern university, in fact, is our public laboratory for viewing this synergy of democracy, freedom, human rights, and justice. In the U.S. presently, hate speech and violence has erupted on colleges campuses against pro-Israeli student groups and pro-Palestinian student groups. University presidents, as noted earlier in this paper, are at a loss of what to say to the public. Many remain silent and in the shadows.

The Harvard debacles where pro-Palestinian student groups signed a petition that blamed Israel for all the violence, including the Hamas attack on 7 October where 1400 Israeli civilians and military were murdered is an example. The response from Harvard pro-Israeli donors was swift and they have resigned from boards and withdraw their financial support to Harvard. The new president at Harvard waited 3



days to make any public statement about the crisis in Gaza and ONLY after donors started abandoning their support of Harvard.

The key point here is if we cannot practice democracy, human rights, civility, freedom, and afford all students and stakeholders the assurance of justice, then what chance do we have of producing societies that embrace these values as central to our lives. This goes back to the idea that university leaders must come out of the shadows and engage with society and that they should have their voices heard. Leaders must ensure their campuses and digital airways personify the best of the human spirit embodied in democratic ideals, human rights, freedom and justice for all. Indeed, although universities of the future must look different and be different, this interconnected construct of democracy (freedom, human rights, justice) and its interconnected components is a commonality that all universities of the future should aspire.

### **Massive Digital Hybrid Learning (MDHL)**

Dede and Lidwell (2023), drawing upon task force deliberations conducted by Stanford, MIT and Harvard Universities, suggested that Massive Digital Hybrid Learning (MDHL) may be a viable option for future universities, particularly dual mode universities that can use the hybridity to scale up student access without becoming a full-scale open university. These task forces were created to determine innovative approach to digital teaching during the pandemic. The findings that cut across all three institutions included greater teacher innovation, student centred approaches, increased students engagement approaches, and increased student access. The researchers provided examples of A.I. being used to enhance teacher, social and cognitive presence (Community of Inquiry Theory), the use of A.I. for online class discussions, and for A.I. analysing general transcripts of classes to provide timely feedback to teachers. This is early days but demonstrates how A.I. is already being used for complement rather than duplicate processes; and supplement rather replace the roles of teachers.

The researchers commentary on how to implement MDHL was very interesting. They suggested that faculty need to be trained around various A.I. that described more as

augmenting human intelligence with A.I. rather than seeing it as something stand alone.

Moreover, the researchers suggested greater attention to authentic and rigorous assessment; doing things better can in turn be used to doing better things in a variety of educational contexts.

The final concept that is relevant for future universities was the discussion of ‘unlearning’ (Dede & Lidwell, 2023). Professor Chris Dede of Harvard University has written about this process before accentuating that part of successive change processes require unlearning old ways of doing things. This is not simply about teaching but also about long held theories. Dede and Lidwell write:

*Faculty and leadership in higher/continuing education will have to let go of deeply held, emotionally valued identities in service of transformational change to a different, more effective set of behaviors. This is both individual (an instructor transforming instructional practices from presentation and assimilation to active, collaborative learning by students) and institutional (a higher education institution transforming from degrees certified by seat time and standardized tests to credentials certified by proficiency on competency-based measures). Unlearning requires not only novel intellectual approaches, but also individual and collective emotional and social support for shifting our identities—not in terms of fundamental character and capabilities, but in terms of how those are expressed as our context shifts over time (p. 8).*

### **Future Research**

As reiterated earlier in the paper, our descriptive and speculative exploration of issues related to future universities ultimately must return to empiricism. The initial question presented in the introduction that asked what are some of the possible topics might be that will open doors for universities to look and be different, yet unique in the future. We identified some of these including moving universities out of the shadows, strategic reset architecture for shifting the directions of universities,

the role of leadership, agility and adaptation versus future proofing; digital technologies and A.I., university geopolitical realignment; hope, democracy, justice, human rights and freedom; and Massive Digital Hybrid Learning (MDHL). Future research questions to further these topics may include:

1. What are the key affordance and barrier for universities to emerge from the shadows and engage in geopolitical realignment?
2. What are the key steps in strategic reset for 2050 universities? What are the key attributes for different types of universities and how and why will these differentiate institutions in the market place?
3. What key roles can universities play in the preservation and advocacy of democratic ideals, human rights, freedom, hope and ultimately universities that reflect justice reflective of society?
4. Digital technologies and social media in particular can be used for misinformation, mass media biases, and promoting hate speech, violence, murder and other crimes against humanity. What role can universities and K-12 educators play in educating students about the ethical, moral and legal imperatives of digital media?
5. What are some key examples of ‘unlearning’ that would leverage greater agility, adaptation and innovation in 2050 universities? How do we preserve the best of our university traditions and values and merge these with key values emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
6. What types of new university structures and architectures will be necessary to allow universities or the future to look different, be different, and respond to changes in the educational and societal landscape rapidly, efficiently, and effectively?

### **Summary**

Universities not only should look different – they must be different in 2050. Institutions need faster decision making processes that engage all stakeholder groups and reflect sound judgment. Leadership, agility and adaptation are the key attributes for institutions to respond to any emerging changes in market conditions, crises, and society. This is a proactive repositioning rather than a naïve mindset of future

proofing that is simply not attainable. Strategic reset can be a powerful architecture for institutions to stay connected with their local markets, constituencies and take responsibility for helping all of these be successful (Crow, 2023). Leading from the shadows is not a viable role of universities nor its leaders as we progress towards 2050.

In the final analysis, institutional agility and adaptation are also going to be a function of genuine visionary and empathetic leadership. This means we will need very astute leaders whose vision for the future can reshape the culture and core values of the institution. Great leaders view every situation as an opportunity and agility, flexibility and adaptive mantras for future universities will require an almost magical leadership.

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