

Have We Given Enough Consideration to the Universal Phase?

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Once participation of upward of 80+ percent of populations in some form of advanced learning is viewed as obligatory, a revolution in the modes of provision becomes necessary. But our postsecondary/tertiary education systems have changed very little; all eyes remain on university. Have we given sufficient strategic consideration to the shape, role, and constituent parts of the tertiary system in the universal phase?

The massification of postsecondary/tertiary education has been a tremendous success. In the 1970s, only 10 percent of the world's school leavers were enrolled and the general enrollment ratio (GER) exceeded 15 percent in only 19 countries, led by the US at 47.0 percent. By 2023, 79 percent of European and North American school leavers were enrolled in tertiary education along with over 60 percent in Oceania and eastern/southeastern Asia; only sub-Saharan Africa, at 9 percent, lagged significantly behind. As the learner population has increased, so has its diversity by age, background, and circumstances.

But faultlines are visible everywhere. Geopolitical/geoeconomic transformations, demographic shifts, climate change, and the technological/AI revolution are dramatically changing the world of work with significant implications for individuals and society. Are our current educational systems a match for the challenges of uneven economic growth; sluggish innovation; skill shortages; perceived divergence between qualifications, skills, and employment; deepening social and regional inequalities; and concerns around value for money? Have we put too much emphasis on the omnipresent university model and failed to consider alternatives? What lessons should we learn from populism's response to people feeling frustrated and left behind?

How these challenges are playing out varies considerably—but there are lessons for everyone. As people in Ireland say, "It may not be your problem today, but it may be someday."

Faultlines

If the earlier phase of massification was shaped by the shift to the knowledge economy and the need for high-value knowledge workers buttressed by personal ambition and social positioning, the transition to the universal age is being shaped by the successes and disappointments of those earlier aspirations. As more people graduate, the link between a university qualification and higher earnings weakens, and concerns rise about "[elite overproduction](#)" and return on investment. The

[International Labour Organization](#) argues that economic growth is unlikely to be sufficient to "provide enough productive, quality jobs for the large and growing populations of young people entering the labour market."

On the basis that what is repeatable is replaceable, AI's impact is already beginning to affect graduate entry jobs in coveted "white-collar" law, finance, accounting, consulting, etc. In contrast, many forms of employment (e.g., technical, teaching, caring, counseling, nursing, and the traditional trades/crafts) often perceived as lower-status are likely to be key to the future success of societies and economies.

Demographic shifts are upending enrollment expectations. On the notion of "build them and they will come," institutions previously needed to do relatively little to recruit learners. Government support is becoming unreliable due to its own revenue challenges and competitive demands from elsewhere within society/economies, together with learners' and public unwillingness to cover the costs. The private sector is growing worldwide even in countries with no/relatively low public tuition costs. While [mergers and closures are being considered across many countries](#), neither these changes nor the rush to establish transnational education outposts are likely to resolve growing tensions and structural problems.

As the sector has expanded, it has paradoxically become more vertically stratified and unequal with average skills levels not increasing, and the share of people not in employment, education or training ([NEET exceeding 15% in several OECD countries](#)). Status and educational credentialism, policy, and regulation have positioned research universities at the top of the educational ladder. Hidden from view has been the contributory role played by rankings in reproducing social and economic elites, increasing state subsidies and benefits to privileged institutions usually located in large urban centers and the people who study at them, thus amplifying regional disparities and social tensions.

The intersection of technology, demography, inequalities, finance, and competition has exposed a tsunami of faultlines. Yet

higher education institutions and the academic community have largely been tone-deaf to questions about curriculum relevance, learner outcomes, skill gaps, underemployment, labor mismatch, and so on. Ironically, as [consecutive surveys](#) have shown high percentages of people expressing disappointment, demands to widen participation through the *current* institutional forms have grown. Whether causation, correlation, or coincidence, aspirant frustrations around employment and housing opportunities, broken faith in meritocracy, regional disparities, and loss of trust across policy spheres are rising, feeding into cultural and economic discontent and other grievances.

The Universal Phase Is Tertiary

Once postsecondary education becomes obligatory for the overwhelming majority of the population, there will be a necessary revolution in the modes of provision. While the expansion of the number of institutions helped resolve earlier challenges of learner ambition and labor market demand, [“more of the same”](#) is no longer a solution.

Heretofore, all eyes have been on (research) universities and “going to uni” as the prime ambition. The California system has been hailed as a system solution to diversity, but in reality, it created three distinct tiers based on the division of labor, talent, and knowledge production. Other countries, such as Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, have a strict binary division between research-intensive universities and universities of applied sciences, atop a secondary system with vocational and academic pathways. In both arrangements, diversity is a hierarchy stretching from research (elite) universities at one end to teaching (mass) and vocational at the other. Research intensity, rather than educational provision, has been the key differentiator and reputational symbol as well as a determinant of funding.

Notably, technical and vocational education and training/community colleges, polytechnics, higher technical education, etc. are principally seen as alternative access routes to higher education or providers “of last resort.” Pejorative terms such as “non-universities” are used to describe a wide range of institutions while “academic” universities are viewed as the only path to “real” success.

Ireland is a case study. Over 95 percent of students complete secondary school, with almost 70 percent of learners transitioning directly to university and 22.2 percent to further education and training (FET). Since adopting an economic model based on foreign direct investment in 1958, the big story has been massification. Quite simply, the aim has been to get more people well-educated. Today Ireland has a multicultural economically dynamic economy, [one of the richest in the world](#).

However, as the higher education system has expanded and evolved, FET has declined or stagnated. There are significant skill shortages in key areas and evidence that [~30 percent of graduates do not require their level of qualifications for their current roles](#). AI is estimated to affect [upwards of 7% of employment in primarily “white collar” jobs](#). Emigration is on the rise again. Frustrated ambitions combined with a shortage of housing, high rents, poor infrastructure, and rising costs of living threaten the social contract.

Countries are realizing that participation of upward of 80+ percent of populations in some form of advanced learning—vocational, technical, academic—requires a more dramatic transformation of the system as a whole. In May 2022, the Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science launched a “policy vision for a more unified tertiary education and research system....” The [first phase of the policy vision](#), *Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge – policy platform*, set out some steps; however, brownfield transformation is slow.

While developed countries experience a *demographic deficit* and developing countries a *demographic dividend*, both share similar challenges. As demand continues to rise, countries face a proliferation of institutions (public and private) being outpaced by, *inter alia*, social and economic change, technology/AI, labor market dynamics, available resources and infrastructure, regulatory capacity, and geopolitical tensions. In our rush to build successful knowledge economies, we need to learn lessons from what has and has not worked and engage in strategic foresight around the shape, role, and constituent parts of a diversified tertiary system for the universal phase.

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This paper draws on a forthcoming chapter, “Congestion and Contestation in the Universal Phase: Trends and Faultlines Across the Tertiary Landscape,” in [Handbook on Competition in Higher Education](#), edited by Pedro N. Teixeira & Barbara Sporn.