



Higher Ed Innovation is a Global Undertaking

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The following piece is adapted from remarks delivered by Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University, at the 13th Transatlantic Dialogue in Salzburg, Austria, July 5, 2012.

American higher education is under scrutiny as never before. Nearly every sector of society is concerned about rising costs and—for the first time in the postwar period—educated people are questioning whether college is the best path to professional success.

This heightened focus—and a range of global pressures—is leading American higher education to innovate. Led by our comprehensive research universities, the American system has long been considered the envy of the world. Today this system is experimenting with innovations around cost, modes of knowledge delivery, and even research.

But we cannot assume that we have a monopoly on innovation in higher education. Based on tremendous internal pressures and less burdened by existing infrastructure, emerging nations may become an important source of innovations that provide lessons for the world's premier system.

The Changing Landscape

The U.S. model of higher education—competitive, meritocratic, and diverse—has had unparalleled success in promoting access, opportunity for individuals, and prosperity and innovation for the nation at large. But as we approach the middle of the 21st century, its fundamental characteristics are being called into question and global competition is increasing.

First, our model is inherently exclusionary. We have focused on a small segment of the population—young adults between the ages of 18 and 25—and we measure our success and our prestige by the number of applicants we reject.

In addition, our residential approach, which also caps the number of students we serve, is extremely costly. And we are not meeting the needs of nontraditional learners—older and working adults, and those seeking flexible schedules.

Discussions about cost and access are also occurring in the emerging world, where demand for higher education is measured in hundreds of millions of students, and nations like China and India are making unprecedented investments in education. These nations are looking beyond the needs of the elite, and it's clear that our exclusionary and residential model cannot provide mass education. The American model “is not scalable, not adaptable, and not affordable,” Sam Pitroda, educational adviser to India's prime minister, declared at a U.S.–India education summit last year. Writing in the *Guardian Higher Education Network*, Lloyd Armstrong raised similar issues.

Instead, what's needed are multiple modes of delivery: on-site, virtual, and customized hybrid programs that can accommodate a diversity of learners, including full-time and part-time students, young adults, and lifelong learners.

And yes, we are now discovering that these approaches are also needed here at home.

Other Western metrics are being questioned as well. In the U.S., we have traditionally focused on input measures—the quality of the students we accept. In emerging nations, output measures are critical: What skills are being taught? Are graduates prepared for jobs in critical sectors of the economy? Are they finding employment?

The relevance of the American curriculum is also being scrutinized in domains from business to medicine to literature, as is the pre-eminence of English as the lingua franca of the academic world. We are seeing a re-emergence of linguistic diversity, which means that multilingual speakers in Europe and the emerging world have an advantage.

Here and abroad, new, nontraditional players are entering the scene and taking advantage of an expanding global marketplace. For-profits, NGOs, technical firms, and other businesses are providing an array of educational content on multiple platforms and for diverse populations. For-profits, for example, are offering a comprehensive curriculum in competition with a traditional university, but online and at a lower price point. Business employees are afforded opportunities for uniquely tailored on-site training, offered by employers and often in partnership with an educational institution.

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With new players, new forms of delivery, and the broad reach of massive open online courses, there is a decoupling of knowledge transmission and credentialing. In other words, the education is provided by one entity, but the credentials are awarded by another, nonacademic entity—the state, a supranational entity, or even a business that administers tests.

Challenges to the Research Model

The increased scrutiny of American higher education extends to the research enterprise. For example, here in the U.S. we assume the universality of research themes such as climate change. But in emerging nations, research is oriented toward the growth of the national economy and focused on relevant national and local needs.

By definition, the approach is more practical. Emphasis on applied research is particularly strong where private funders support the work, as is increasingly the case both here and abroad.

A more cost-conscious approach also distinguishes the non-Western model from our own, and here again we have much to learn. In the U.S., government-funding cuts are forcing us to pay closer attention to the cost of research and innovation. But cost issues have always been at the forefront in India and elsewhere in the emerging world. There, in a “reverse innovation” mode, medical equipment and other products are being developed at low cost for local markets, and then introduced to Western buyers.

Non-Western players are also competing for our domestic talent, recruiting faculty from prestigious institutions with offers of high pay and living expenses, as well as facilities that rival or exceed our own. And we are educating talented students who are bringing their expertise back to India, China, and other home countries as a result of U.S. immigration policies. This reverse brain drain has serious consequences for our competitiveness.

Truly Global Universities

Given the limitations of the traditional American model, and the nature and extent of the global challenges, it is inevitable that we will see the emergence of something new. These new models may evolve in the U.S., but we do not have a monopoly on educational innovations. Indeed, in many respects, institutions in emerging nations are better positioned to innovate.

The educational needs of the emerging world are more acute in terms of scale and accessibility. And institutions from these regions are capable of responding more quickly and nimbly to local and global market conditions than tradition-bound American universities.

Eventually the lines between the Western and emerging nations may disappear and we will see truly global universities—institutions in which the brand is decoupled from a single bricks-and-mortar manifestation of the brand. These institutions will reach scale and deliver mass education in multiple formats throughout the world—on multiple campuses, virtually, and through hybrid forms that combine virtual and on-site experience in various permutations and combinations.

These new global institutions will be flexible and adaptable, responsive to local needs, demands, and priorities, while simultaneously maintaining a global perspective and global connections. They will offer diverse curricula with a comparative dimension to the study of science, literature, and policy questions, among other topics.

At the same time, the curricula will be tailored to meet the unique needs of different locations—for example, a public health program offered for Japanese students might address the needs of an aging population, while a program for Indian students might focus on the needs of young children. Similarly, the menu of professional programs will be aligned with the needs of the local economy, but informed by global trends and global expertise.

Selecting among these programs and with the ability to determine how, where, and when they study, students of the global university will have the opportunity to customize the time to degree, the format that best matches their learning style and schedule, and the price they pay. Technology is already making this vision possible to a degree never before imaginable. Internet connectivity and access is expanding, and apps for smart phones are delivering educational content globally, even in areas where Internet access is limited.

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Research will become increasingly unbundled from teaching as the global university establishes research sites and pursues collaborations with businesses and institutional partners around the world. In each locale, and each partnership, the balance between global, regional, and local issues will necessarily be different.

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Around the globe, the demand for higher education and the need for research and innovation have never been greater. As we in the U.S. seek to address these challenges, we would do well to pay close attention to what’s happening in the emerging world.

In these nations, innovation is not merely a thoughtful response to changing conditions; it is absolutely essential to address enormous and urgent needs. With an organic understanding of these needs and freedom from historical constraints, emerging nations are uniquely situated to generate new models, relevant to current and local conditions.

This is the first step in the evolution of truly global universities. Despite the pre-eminence of the American model, we should not be surprised if the future arises not from the West, but from the emerging world.

