

THE CRITICAL  
ENGAGEMENT OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION WITH  
FUTURE CRISES

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## Introduction

This world is no stranger to crises of all kinds, for instance, the 2007 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019. However, the higher education sector has been regrettably slow and stagnant in the wake of these crises. For instance, the boom of remote and virtual pedagogical tools and methods only came after the pandemic hit, even though most institutions had possessed the necessary infrastructure long before.

Similarly, the crisis in liberal democracy and the rise in authoritarianism (e.g., Thomson & Ip, 2020; Hartman et al., 2021) did not seem to matter much in the contemporary higher education sector. This article argues that such a conception is wrong. In fact, the sector could and should contribute in many ways, but has failed to do so. This article discusses three main aspects of higher education – curriculum design, learner empowerment, and interdisciplinarity – arguing what went wrong and what should be changed. These transformations will be essential

in shaping a more sustainable and resilient higher education system.

### **Curriculum Design**

As Dewey (1902, pp. 11–12) noted, curriculum is “a continuous reconstruction, moving from the child’s present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies”. Learning builds on the learner’s curiosity. Therefore, curriculum is not a “strictly limited body of content”, but rather an ongoing and dynamic “process or procedure” (Caswell & Campbell, 1935, p. 70). Nonetheless, the current approach emphasizes incorporating the past knowledge and traditional ways of living – “an ‘information dump’ of principles and conclusions” (Whetten & Clark, 1996, p. 156) – or asking students to tackle immediate problems after they have emerged. Meanwhile, courses, materials, and methods focused on hard and static facts and theories, and sometimes (but not always) on developing a specific point of view or analysis towards those problems.

Lamentably, this approach lags behind rather than looks forward. In other words, it *responds* rather than *foresees*. Such an approach will be often slow, unresponsive, or even resistant to change. It will be impossible to keep pace with larger contextual changes and even unprecedented disruptive crises. The reality is that many current and future crises happen beyond conventional understandings, approaches, and disciplines. This implies an imperative need for all individuals to think, learn, and prepare for the challenges and opportunities ahead. Living in a highly complex and ever-changing world, or the “VUCA” (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 41), there will certainly be shifting demands and expectations in terms of the required knowledge and skill sets, and there is the need to deconstruct and reconstruct one’s knowledge and skills sets continuously.

Silva (2009) noted that a curriculum should emphasize “what students can do with knowledge, rather than what units of knowledge they have”. As such, curriculum designers and course creators should provide

students not so much with the hard knowledge which can easily become obsolete and less valued in the ever-evolving society, but the soft tools to discover and investigate current (or potential) problems around the world, and to explore and even implement solutions that might tackle those novel and ill-defined problems. The search for solutions by producing, rather than consuming, knowledge through active learning and an inquiry-based curriculum is a view widely supported in the literature (e.g., Savery, 2006; Michael, 2006; Justice et al., 2007; Zepke, 2013).

Another way of redesigning a curriculum is to align with future global aims, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations which address a wide range of critical issues of global concern (e.g., Nhamo & Mjimba, 2020; Steele & Rickards, 2021). These headings will be a “vehicle” for students to understand the issues, challenges, and complexities of multiple disciplines, under the real-world context of problems and crises (Sunderland, 2021). Then, they can consider potential ways to make progress and implement solutions in order to attain practicable targets. Throughout the process, students will

recognize themselves as active and engaged citizens with the confidence and responsibility to tackle these challenges within their communities, through collaboration, critical thinking, and innovative problem-solving (Mansori, 2019).

As an example in interdisciplinary general education, the Common Core Curriculum at the University of Hong Kong maps its courses against the SDGs, with transdisciplinary minors and research projects surrounding some of the SDGs (HKU Common Core, n.d.-a). Such thinking will be good “first steps” to gradually and progressively challenge the orthodox educational experience, by allowing students not just to survive by *responding* to the world’s changes, but flourish by *foreseeing* those changes. They will be active and responsible contributors in adapting to and tackling global challenges. Therefore, the incorporation of holistic and flexible frameworks into the design of higher education curriculum and the implementation of active inquiry-based learning are necessary to transcend the minute details of crises and to promote the more enduring and overarching goals of a sustainable future.

## **Learner Empowerment**

To prepare for the many crises ahead, learners must also be highly ready and willing to bear a flexible, adaptable, open-minded, and inquiring mindset (Niemi, 2020). Unfortunately, the “responding” nature in our current higher education system does not readily assist students to acquire such an important mindset. While learners should strive to uphold far more forward-looking visions in order to leverage their strengths and potentials, higher education teachers and institutions should also play a role by empowering learners to explore and unleash their capabilities and capacities to thrive in and contribute to society.

Empowerment can be roughly divided into three stages. First, learners are to be trusted as mature and confident, and they should feel valued for being themselves (Broom, 2015). Second, learners are to lead their own learning by allowing greater control and choice, where they will have a clearer idea of the roles that they can play for society, and they will be actively looking out for

opportunities (Iversen et al., 2015). Third, learners are to map out their own concrete roadmap of transforming society, to push things forward realistically and strategically. In other words, they will be self-motivated to catalyze meaningful societal change.

Various suggestions of student-oriented or student-led initiatives are now developing in higher education (e.g., Hoidn 2017). An example of practical application is the Transdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Initiative at the University of Hong Kong which allows students to conduct a series of authentic and meaningful research projects rooted in their diverse daily encounters and real-world contexts (HKU Common Core, n.d.-b). The inquiry process follows the three stages of empowerment described above: starting with providing trusting environments and familiar backgrounds, followed by actively engaging the learners' own interests and experiences and allowing them to direct their own learning in varied ways (Broom, 2015), and eventually transforming confidence into action by making positive changes to the larger world.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

Interdisciplinarity is now essential in this contemporary world, as many real-life challenges and dilemmas nowadays are impossible to be resolved through a single discipline. In fact, interdisciplinarity is statistically significantly and positively associated with research impact (Okamura, 2019). Many conservative learners often tend to become superficial by suppressing the complexity and hiding the limitations or weaknesses in their ideas. However, any meaningful response to a crisis and inquiry on the future is all about how to tolerate the embedded ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty in society. The courage and ability to break disciplinary boundaries from the traditional siloed nature of the higher education environment requires not only a broad knowledge base but also an embracing mindset (Christensen et al., 2021). Rather than fitting with neat packages and shapes, our minds and ideas need to be further challenged and expanded through interdisciplinarity.

The thinking “skills” in achieving interdisciplinarity involve considering the connections and integrations, as well as constraints and conflicts among multiple disciplines,

dimensions, and analytical perspectives, in order to unearth the constituent elements within challenges and crises and their underlying relationships, interactions, and intersections. Then, these competing or even conflicting viewpoints and interests are coordinated and balanced through a collaborative and synergistic mindset, to reach the eventual informed decision.

An excellent explanation and model to integrate interdisciplinarity into higher education teaching and learning can be found in Power and Handley (2019, p. 556). With the rise of interdisciplinary courses and double degree programs in some higher education institutions, interdisciplinary dialogues and exchanges can be encouraged and fostered. The transdisciplinary study clusters and research initiatives discussed above are also viable methods. The focus is on developing the thinking “skills” for interdisciplinarity – to connect, to integrate, to critically analyze, and to informedly decide – as well as an encouraging and sustainable environment to ensure continuous development of such skills.

## **Conclusion**

A modest reorganization of existing approaches and surface artifacts that are frequently employed by practitioners in higher education is insufficient when our society is constantly in crises of different scales and scopes. We must go much further to reform our curriculum and empower our learners in order to resolve these global issues, challenges, and crises. Only then can learners be liberated and empowered to not simply respond but to foresee and look forward. This also transforms our higher education system to become more sustainable and resilient for the future ahead.

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