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What is Postnormal for Higher Education

Nur Anisah Abdullah

Working Paper

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Abstract

Higher education used to operate in a relatively stable environment in the aspects of finance, structure and governance with occasional operational bugs ameliorated by rather simple process design and re-design. In recent times, the tide brings waves of change from various perspectives such as climate change, pandemic diseases, energy , economic and political crisis, technology and information revolution sweeping many countries across the world. These events present unprecedented threats and opportunities impacting global trade. Higher education cannot escape this momentum of change and is faced with a higher degree of uncertainties. The role of university and the management of institutions has become more complex in the second half of the century. Complexity is a precursor to chaos, where small changes can lead to big consequences. Chaotic environments can be opportune moments for creative and innovative solutions in addressing the emergence of disruptions brought about by changing milieu and advancement of technology. Novelty requires change that almost always contradicts status-quo. This paper discusses the complexities and the resulting chaos and contradictions in the context of higher education from three dimensions (i) structural and governance; (ii) role of university; and (iii) technology and infrastructure. How do we surf this looming tide of change to continue the strive in educating the future society? How does future higher education look? The discussion aims to raise questions, trigger new modes of thinking for the imaginings of higher education futures.

Introduction

As a quick introduction, postnormal times is characterised as "the in between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing really makes sense. ... and the fabric of this period of transition is woven with three Cs : complexity, chaos and contradictions." Sardar (2010, p1).

So what is postnormal for Higher Education?

Let's examine the 3Cs propelling higher education into postnormal times.

Complexity, Chaos and Contradictions in Higher Education

Higher education used to operate in a relatively stable environment in the aspects of finance, structure and governance with occasional operational bugs ameliorated by rather simple process design and re-design. In recent times, the tide brings waves of change from various perspectives such as climate change, pandemic diseases, energy , economic and political crisis, technology and information revolution sweeping many countries across the world. These events present unprecedented threats and opportunities impacting global trade. Higher education can not escape this momentum of change and is faced with a higher degree of uncertainties. The role of university

and the management of institutions has become more complex in the second half of the century. [Barnett \(2000\)](#) characterises the scene of modern knowledge as one of supercomplexity.

Complexity is a precursor to chaos, where small changes can lead to big consequences ([Sardar 2010](#)). Chaos are not necessary always negative. Chaotic environments can be opportune moments for creative and innovative solutions in addressing the emergence of disruptions brought about by changing milieu and advancement of technology. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction (Newton's Third Law). In the context of higher education, every policy implementation or change however positive in nature, has a cost ([Ravetz and Funtowicz, 1999](#); [in Sardar, 2010](#)) hence the contradiction.

The following sections discuss the 3Cs from three perspectives namely, (1) structural and governance; (2) role of university; and (3) technology and infrastructure.

(1) Structural and Governance Complexity: At the *institutional* level, major changes to universe can be examined on two dimensions; public/private good and nation/global development.

Malaysia (National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007) aims to reach a larger university-going age proportion of the population implemented policies, which saw the establishments of private and international institutions partake in educating the country's human capital, massifying higher education, and as a consequence, higher education is now a purchasable private good rather than a non-profit service for the well-being of the public.

Resulting Chaos and Contradictions

Governments were quick to adopt a neoliberal economic agenda over higher education funding of which might cripple academic integrity and independence at various levels ([Pisceoneri and Patel, 2016](#)). An urgent call for a review of the objective of becoming global citizens seems more about "acquiring transnational employment skills, establishing economic networking opportunities or acquiring an advantage in processes of economic migration" and "to have side-lined university social responsibility and commitment to ensuring the quality of life of local and international communities" ([Nicotra and Patel, 2016](#)). This contention proposes for a curriculum change and for institutions to look towards the bigger picture in serving humanity and social justice.

Universities were in chaos in reacting towards to the two dimensions of change introduced in stages beginning 2007 to Malaysian higher education. The level of institutional changes greatly affected *academics* in the way they do things and the things that they do. In a productivity culture, efficiency and effectiveness of education is measured by academic performance using metrics such as number of journal articles published a year, % of student satisfaction ratings; or independent review such as RateYourProfessor. Measures shape behaviours. When academics were expected to deliver outputs with minimal or lack of inputs or support, many resort to 'feeding the beast' practices in managing the number game ([Nur Anisah and Macbryde, 2015](#)). The futures of universities and academics were steered using metrics shaped by the more influential syndicates fuelled by either profit making or personal agenda other than for the well being of the larger society ([Nur Anisah, 2012](#)). Universities were not used to being measured using metrics. Public universities in Malaysia

were not required to present performance report to the ministry until end of 2007. That performance measurement initiative mobilised a country-wide mindset transformation (Nur Anisah, 2012). In the findings of a 2013 impact study reveal that measurement of performance was efficiency-output orientation with a lack of or none at all on effectiveness-outcomes. Face-saving culture prevents universities from learning for improvement. Each head of university shied away from reporting failures as their names were associated with those results. Performance measurement was not about institutional improvement, it was about who did what and how well (Nur Anisah, 2012).

As institutions struggle to mechanistically adapt to those changes academics and *students* were left to keep their heads above waters. Well established institutional processes could not be reviewed and revised quick enough to support the activities that ministries haste to implement. Efforts were also hampered by the lack of resources to manage an effective implementation of those transformation. While universities, administrators and academics were navigating this transformation, students were often short-changed by the resource ought to be invested in holistic student development (Roberts, 2012). Academics were often burdened with reporting that requires compilation of evidence and data entry, time that could be better used to develop content for courses and design delivery of lectures (Nur Anisah, 2012).

(2) Role of University Complexity: For most developing countries, the one of the main higher education objectives was to develop and train the nation for economic reasons. In the recent times, the focus now shifts towards global citizen development, where most part of this was a consequence of the import of international university services and of the mobility of student in crossing borders for education (Knight, 2003, 2004). How do we reconcile the need for locally relevant national development and priorities alongside a commitment to international education for global good?

Resulting Chaos and Contradictions: The early nation-centric institutional activities were more straightforward than the need for collaborations and cooperations with institutions from different parts of the world in an attempt to conceive a platform for students to work on, experiment and experience activities of a global environment. For any useful and meaningful collaboration/cooperation for the internationalisation of education, a foundation of streamlined of qualifications and quality of education must be set. Regionally, ASEAN has commenced efforts to harmonise qualifications and quality (Ng, M. et al, 2012).

Academics find themselves dealing with a different set of issues when Malaysian public universities packed in a 10-20% international students in its enrolment as income generating strategy. Both local and international student faced transition from different environments to university. Different environments of diverse cultures give rise to different interpretations of academic integrity along expectations of academic behaviors that varies between school, university and work environment (International Center of Academic Integrity, 2012) pose a different strand of challenge for the achievement of learning outcomes.

The commodification of education reduces the role of university to training centers for industries. Universities were no longer in control of what it needs to do and how it ought to be functioning at the perils of capitalism.

(3) *Technological Infrastructure Complexity*: A recent StudentCom research reported that 83% of 15-18 year-old state that they could not live without high speed internet, 88% use Facebook daily for communication and 92% own smartphones (White, 2016). Their lives revolve around a digital world and they know what they want when it comes to technology and education. To stay ahead of the game and remain relevant in providing supportive learning environment, universities need to better understand this change in social milieu and the technology disruption.

Resulting Chaos and Contradictions: The advancement of technology brought about information revolution that disrupts the conventional practice in academia and communication. Technology creates ubiquitous learning environments enabling better and quicker access and share of information. Education is now anywhere, anytime. In addition to accessibility to internet and technology-infrastructure, instructional design and content development were two emphases in creating personalised learning environment for student engagements (Bentley and Miller 2004). Academics must now be equipped with different skills set to work on a virtual platform.

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