



Book Review AMJ 2013, 6, 4

An Avalanche is Coming

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Increasing access to communication technologies and globalisation is having a far reaching impact on all aspects of human life including higher education. The traditional picture of a university as a physical space with beautiful buildings set out in sylvan surroundings and the teachers and the taught living and studying in close proximity is rapidly changing. With modern technology like the internet, video lectures, downloadable content, Skype, Blackboard and other technologies the concept of university has been radically transformed. The skill requirements of the global workplace are rapidly evolving and universities often have a tough time ensuring their graduates learn 'employable' skills. A recent book titled *An avalanche is coming* published by the Institute of Public Policy Research of the United Kingdom describes current challenges facing higher education.

In the executive summary three principal challenges are highlighted. Among these are 'How can universities ensure education for employability?', 'How can the link between cost and quality be broken?' and 'How does the entire learning ecosystem need to change to support alternative providers and the future of work?' The cost of a university education is rising faster than inflation while at the same time the 'value' of a university degree is falling. The competition is becoming stiffer and massive open online courses (MOOC) like the start up 'Coursera' which I had described in a previous issue provide free education to a large global audience (Shankar PR. Coursera: Free online learning for the world. Australasian Medical Journal 2012;5:600-601.)

A traditional university undertakes multiple functions like research, granting of degrees, ensuring prosperity of the city/region in which they are located, ensuring access to highly qualified faculty, providing a large student body with a 'learning experience' and assessing students. With modern technology many of these functions can be carried out by other organisations more efficiently creating challenges for traditional universities which have to adapt to continue to thrive. The book concludes with various models of the future university. Among these are the elite universities like Harvard or Oxford, the mass university with cost-effective courses designed for a large student population, the niche university charging more for high quality, specialised courses, the local

university playing an important role in the development of local communities or regions and universities providing a mechanism for lifelong learning.

Medical education has long been more traditional than general education with regulatory bodies and other agencies imposing 'rigid' criteria and standards. Medical schools need to have an attached hospital and students and faculty need to be physically present in the medical school. The proposal of the Open University in the United Kingdom for an 'open' medical school could change the way medicine is taught and learned. I personally feel that the field of medical education cannot be immune to the 'avalanche' of radical changes engulfing higher education!

About the book: Barber M, Donnelly K, Rizvi S. *An avalanche is coming Higher education and the revolution ahead*. Institute for Public Policy Research: London, 2013. Freely available from http://www.ippr.org/images/media/files/publication/2013/04/avalanche-is-coming_Mar2013_10432.pdf