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Bridging Sectors for Tomorrow's Success: Redefining Higher Education Spaces through Industry Collaboration for Classroom Innovation, Mental Health, and Students' Well-Being

Philip G. Laird

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BRIDGING SECTORS FOR TOMORROW'S SUCCESS: REDEFINING HIGHER EDUCATION SPACES THROUGH INDUSTRY COLLABORATION FOR CLASSROOM INNOVATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

Philip G. Laird

Public lecture delivered by Dr. Philip G. Laird, Vice President for Innovation Global and Academic Partnerships, Trinity Western University (TWU), Langley, BC, Canada, at the TWU-ABUAD 2023 International Conference on Leadership and Governance for Sustainable Change and Wealth Creation, held on October 19, 2023 at Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

It is an absolute privilege and honour for me to stand before you today at this esteemed gathering of intellectuals, educators, and students. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Afe Babalola University for hosting this conference and providing this platform to discuss one of the most pressing issues in higher education today – the redefinition of higher education spaces through industry collaboration for classroom innovation, mental health, and students' well-being.

Your Excellency, Aare Afe Babalola, Founder/Chancellor of Afe Babalola University, it is indeed an honor to recognize your 60th anniversary of being called-to-bar. Your extensive legal career, global experience, and dedication to higher education is exemeplary. Your remarkable commitment to higher education and social justice in Nigeria and across the Pan-African continent is a testament to your vision of a brighter future for all.

His Excellency Governor Biodun A. Oyebanji, Executive Governor of Ekiti State, Nigeria, Professor E. Smaranda Olaride, Vice-Chancellor of Afe Babalola University, and Dr. Imbenzi George, Director of International Engagement of TWU and Honourary Consul of the Government of Kenya. To all the speakers, representatives, faculty staff and students in

attendance at this conference, Welcome and my deepest Greetings from Canada on behalf of Trinity Western University

In today's rapidly changing world, no sector can afford to operate in isolation. Higher education institutions, in particular, are facing mounting pressure to redefine their role and relevance in society. This necessitates a fundamental shift in the way we view and approach education.

The traditional model of education, with its emphasis on rote memorization and passive learning, is no longer sufficient. To prepare students for the demands of the rapidly evolving job market and a technologically mediated world, we need to foster creativity, technological sophistication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. And to achieve this, we must first equip learners to understand and adapt to the changing demands of the global environment, and next to prepare a bridge between higher education institutions and industries. With a student centric focus, we can prepare learners for the careers of the future, strengthen their resilience and well being in order to equip them to be men and women that God has made each one to be.

The imperative to innovate immediately and comprehensively is greater than it has ever been as higher education is on the precipice of a transformation in the value chain that has sustained our current version of Universities since the Baby Boom of the 1960's.

In late 2018, Clayton Christiansen, one of the foremost authors on innovation, predicted that 50% of the 4000 Universities and Colleges in the US would disappear, merge or go bankrupt by 2030. He made this prediction because he could see that higher education was not providing the value that the next generation of learners required and that the institutions of higher education were not adapting quickly enough to the transformations that were taking place both within the nontraditional education sector and outside the industry. These pressures that pushed Christensen to make this dire prediction for higher education 5 years ago have only increased through the pandemic and accelerated post-pandemic. In North America, the higher education landscape is under tremendous pressure and transformation.
The expansion of online and open source education through the pandemic years is a good example of the accelerating pace of

change within higher education. In 2017, there were 500 courses available on MOOCS (or massively open online courses) that could be aggregated to deliver 9 degrees to students around the world. By 2021, there were 220 million students worldwide who participated in MOOCS that were delivered by 950 Universities providing 19,400 courses and delivering 1670 microcredentials and 70 fully MOOC-based degrees. In a four year span, through a pandemic, the number of MOOC courses available to the world for free increased from 500 to 19,400. The number of credentials increased from 9 to 1740. This exponential growth in the ed tech arena has not waned, rather the ed tech sector continues to grow and consume an increasing proportion of the higher education marketplace.

And lest we think the provision of Massively Open Online Courses to the world is provided by lower status institutions, the institutions that do provide MOOCS open to the world include Stanford, UBC, Johns Hopkins, IIT, Peking University, Tsingua, Yale, Harvard and MIT. Yes, the world's top Universities are all providing education for free to the world. High quality and increasingly credentialized education to anyone with a smartphone and internet connection.

The primary problem Universities face today is that the required job skills for success of graduates are changing at warp speed. Many believe that 65% of children born today will work in jobs that currently do not exist. That the graduates of the future are as likely to work in the informal or 'gig' ecomomy as they are to enter traditional careers in government or multinational companies. That many of the current jobs that University graduates take, did not exist a decade ago, and that the graduates of the future will need to be equipped with an adaptive skill set that will flex with the changing demands of the workplace, regardless of whether they are teachers, nurses, doctors, economists, engineers, game developers or psychologists. 21st Century Universities will need to become agile, adaptive and imaginative places where innovation thrives.
So how can Universities adapt to the changing higher education ecosystem to prepare students for a lifetime of flourishing in a rapidly evolving business landscape?

2. THE ROLE OF PRACTICAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL EDUCATION

To effectively adapt to the rapidly evolving business landscape, we must focus on the spaces, supports, and systems we provide to students both digitally, physically and in the interspace between then where industry and education collide. As educators, we must take a leadership role in managing this space, because we are at risk, more than at any time in history, of losing our impact on the next generation of leaders to for-profit organizations who have a primary interest in growth and profit rather than the well-being and flourishing of the leaders of the future.

Learners today require learning spaces that allow for adaptive and integrative experiences. The 'Flipped Classroom' model has grown in its acceptance and use in higher education. In this model, the lectures, readings and content of a class are distributed online and expected to be accessed and read by students prior to class. Flipped classrooms are interactive spaces rather than lecture spaces. In these classrooms, faculty function as facilitators of learning—leading discussions, helping students grow in their understanding of content, challenging students to think deeper, and providing real life examples for the content. In this facilitated learning environment, students are coached to develop their full potential. At Trinity Western University, we have expanded the facilitated education model to include centers around the world where content is delivered over the internet to students globally. Students then gather with certified facilitators to examine the knowledge and challenge each other in a facilitated learning experience. Students then complete their assignments and submit them to TWU faculty in Canada who grade and respond to the assignments. This is one example of a different learning model that utilizes very different learning spaces—gone are the students in rows looking at a screen and powerpoint presentation. In this space, students are organized in learning pods of 4-6 students throughout the classroom, they are given case studies, reflective questions, or examples from the textbook or industry to serve as a backdrop for their facilitated learning sessions. This type of education is alive, integrated and helps students to thrive in the learning space. Within such an imaginative space, institutions can create natural ecosystems with wood and natural light as well as using broad spectrum light in the illumination system to support

the mental health of students. By attending to both the academic and physical environment, Universities can create learning spaces the support learners to thrive.

Today, more than ever, Universities must support students to graduate with degrees that are in demand in the marketplace, where they will chart a course for a better life with greater purpose, more opportunity, longer employment, and higher earnings.

The key way to provide this type of education is first to intentionally integrate the education structure into the employment market that students will enter and second to equip graduates with an adaptive skill set that will prepare them for a lifetime of change and adaptation in their careers. Clearly building stronger bridges between universities and industry requires a commitment to adapt University curriculum to the needs of industries, developing partnerships between universities and industries and providing internships, practical and cooperative (coop) education to help University students get hands-on experiences prior to graduation.

3. NEED FOR INDUSTRY COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Additionally, industry partnerships can facilitate the co-creation of curriculum and the development of industry-specific programs. By involving industry professionals in the design and delivery of courses, we can ensure that our graduates are equipped with the latest industry-relevant knowledge and skills. Such collaborations can also lead to research opportunities and the commercialization of innovations, benefitting both academia and industry.

Moreover, industry collaboration can help bridge the gap between theory and practice. By connecting classroom learning with real-world challenges, students can gain a deeper understanding of the subjects they study and their applications in diverse industries. This inclusive approach to education not only enhances students' employability but also promotes lifelong learning and adaptability. In industry integrations, the

classroom is no longer a physical space. It is wherever learning takes place—in the industry coop, online, or integrated into a practicum or travel-abroad experience.

Another related area of growth in the higher education landscape is the emergence of microcredentials and the interest Universities may have on stacking these credentials. This market has expanded dramatically with the advent of innovations such as 'linkedin learning' that provide badges and recognition for workplace training—that fully integrate into your resume and linked in profile. Microcredentials have become critical ways to assess the competencies of learners to perform job ready skills. Ideally suited for adult learners and milenneials, who might be prone to boredom with traditional degrees, microcredentials provide stepping stones for learners of the future who might be more inclined to learn as they work rather than to learn before they work. For organizations, microcredentials provide value in knowing the specific skills of employees or through training employees while they work on the job. Microcredentials, also known as digital badges or nanodegrees, offer a flexible and efficient way for individuals to acquire specific skills and knowledge in a short period of time. These credentials are stackable, meaning that learners can build upon their existing knowledge and continually upgrade their skill sets. Moreover, as employers increasingly prioritize skills over traditional degrees, microcredentials provide a more tangible and relevant demonstration of an individual's expertise that employers can trust. The pandemic has accelerated the development and recognition of these microcredentials, as individuals upskilled or reskilled themselves during periods of lockdown and limited job opportunities.

The pandemic "broke the mould" of traditional learning, but it also "broke the rigidity of our thinking about quality education". The future of learning will combine traditional degrees, online degrees, open source and free education as well as the microcredential stackable badge models into a robust credential recognition and verification system that is similar to blockchain in finance.

The integration of blockchain technology into higher education will bring consistency, transparency and security to academic records and credentials. Blockchain will allow for the secure and tamper-proof storage of educational achievements, ensuring that they cannot be falsified or misrepresented. In Canada, the beginnings of this model has been used through ApplyProof which provides a verification system for international student letters of acceptance into universities. This model of the future will eliminate the need for time-consuming and costly verification processes, making the credential attainment and recognition system more internationally recognized, efficient, transparent and reliable. Moreover, blockchain has the potential to enable lifelong learning and microcredential integration into traditional degrees. In the foreseeable future, individuals will accumulate their digital badges and certificates in a secure blockchain-based ecosystem, creating a comprehensive and verifiable record of their skills and achievements. These innovations in the higher education landscape provide lifelong learning and increased credential recognition in the workplace. In this way University graduates can continue to enhance their training and skillsets on the job while the career market or their particular industry changes.

4. ADVANCING MENTAL WELL BEING

Moving on to the second critical aspect of redefining higher education spaces – mental health. The mental well-being of students is a growing concern in today's fast-paced and competitive environment. College life can be overwhelming, with the pressure to succeed academically and socially, combined with the challenges of personal growth and transition. It is imperative that higher education institutions prioritize the mental health of their students.

It is often said that we now live in a "post-truth" society, where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than social media posts, tweets, polls, emotions and personal beliefs.[4] In many ways, this seems like a recent development, brought on by the rise of social media and the

24-hour news cycle, but the assault on objective truth has been centuries in the making.[5] The roots of the post-truth phenomenon can be traced back to the "Enlightenment" when reason and the scientific method were elevated as the ultimate source of truth leading to a wave of belief that the world was knowable through human reason.[6]

With the expansion of scientific inquiry across non-scientific disciplines, this modernistic view was further strengthened, as it seemed that everything could be explained through observation and experimentation. However, there have always been those who have challenged this view of objective truth. For example, in the 19th century, thinkers such as Hegel and Marx argued that reason was not the only way of understanding the world and that history was shaped by perspectival experiences, individual worldviews, and economic and social forces.[6]

With the tripartite technological adaptations of the internet, smartphones, and the rise of social media within a context of perpetual 24-hour news cycles, the post-truth society expanded in the 21st century.[10] Although the gatekeepers of information continued to be deemed to be trustworthy; by putting the tools of technological creation into the hands of the public, anyone could publish their own content, develop their own ideas and opinions, and share it with the world.[11] Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to discern objective truth and to make decisions based on objective facts.

There is no question that the assault on objective truth and the rapidly changing technological environment for young people has had a negative impact on mental health. Today's University student is bombarded by information from all sides without the requisite digital sophistication to understand truth from fiction. Given the polarized nature of much of this information and the need for University students to develop an identity that will guide their lives, University students can become radicalized, objectified, and marginalized by the nature of the content they consume and the resultant identities and social communities they form. Add the fact that most current

University students have spent at least some time in segregation due to the pandemic during formative years of development and there is no question that the University student today struggles more with diverse mental health issues that they did a decade ago.

Today, people of all ages face an onslaught of technological information at all times of the day and night that bombard us with information that we are ill equipped to handle Psychologically. As a result, we have become addicted. Given all encompassing accessibility, we are constantly struggling with FOMO or the Fear of Missing out on activities that we are hearing about constantly, or JOMO, the joy of missing out on socially interactive experiences so that we can stay home by ourselves and manage our technology. Young people face FOJI or the fear of joining social situations due to social anxieties caused by a lack of familiarity with normal human social interaction as a result of online mediated forms of social behavior becoming standard social protocol. To all of this we have the power of cell phone and internet addiction. NOMOPOBIA as a driver of our irrational fear that we might lose our cell phone and have no connection to our social life that is mediated entirely through our cell phone.

Against this backdrop of rapid change are human beings trying to make sense of the world, their identity, their role in the world, their future and their personal impact. As a Psychologist, I have been interested in the impact of Global and technological change on the Human Condition for over two decades. In 2018, the Pew Center conducted a study on the interface and impact of digital technology on human wellbeing called "The Future of Well-Being in a Tech Saturated World". Experts were brought in to discuss the issues and challenges in a Tech Saturated World and the effective cyborgization of humanity. In 2002, Chris Hables Gray wrote a futuristic

book called Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age, Hales argued two decades ago that human beings were rapidly on their way to becoming cyborgs—labeled in the infamous Borg from Star Trek fame that are half human, half technologically mediated. Gray has argued that we are all cyborgs given that our humanity, social relationships, education and politics are all technologically mediated today. From glasses that are used to address our myopic vision, to cell phones to connect to family and friends, to online classes that have been used to distribute knowledge over the internet through the pandemic, it is clear that human cyborgization now dominates human identity across the globe. The question we need to ask ourself from a Psychological perspective is this—Are we better off with technology?

Nicholas Carr, well-known author of numerous books and articles on technology and culture, wrote, "We now have a substantial body of empirical and experiential evidence on the personal effects of the internet, social media and smartphones. The news is not good. While there are certainly people who benefit from connectedness, the evidence makes clear that, in general, the kind of constant, intrusive connectedness that now characterizes people's lives has harmful cognitive and emotional consequences. Among other things, the research reveals a strong association, and likely a causal one, between heavy phone and internet use and losses of analytical and problem-solving skill, memory formation, contextual thinking, conversational depth and empathy as well as increases in anxiety."

Clearly, people are not biologically equipped for the pace of change and volume of information we receive and produce in our daily lives. And, rather than making us smarter and more knowlegable, there is evidence that the

information onslaught brought on by technology has made us dumber and less capable of making good, well-reasoned decisions. Clearly, 21st century leaders cannot rely on their education, personal saavy, and technical expertise alone to cast a vision, map out a business strategy, and implement marketing tactics in a reasoned and well-informed way.

David Rosenthal scientist from Stanford University stated:

> The digital economy is based upon competition to consume humans' attention. This competition has existed for a long time, but the current generation of tools for consuming attention is far more effective than previous generations. Economies of scale and network effects have placed control of these tools in a very small number of exponentially powerful companies driven to maximize profit. This is having negative effects on society. Even if these companies wanted to produce less negative social effects, they have no idea how to, and doing so would impair their bottom line.

Alex Halavais, director of the M.A. in social technologies program at Arizona State University, said:

> The primary change needs to come in education. We need to radically and rapidly change our education system. From a very early age, people need to understand how to interact with networked, digital technologies. They need to learn how to use social media, and learn how not to be used by it. They need to understand how to assemble reliable information and how to detect garbage. They need to be able to shape the media they are immersed in. They need to be aware of how algorithms and marketing – and the companies, governments, and other organizations that

produce them – help to shape the ways in which they see the world.

In this age of information overload, bombardment of messages, algorithms used to drive our choices, activate dopamine receptors and keep us engaged in what the creator of the content wants us to engage, the critical adaptive skill for humans is analytics—the art of making meaning of data. People need education and training that equips them to understand the appropriate use of technology in their lives and the limits of technology in improving rather than enveloping their lives.

Collaboration with industry can help institutions develop innovative strategies and solutions to address mental health issues. By partnering with mental health professionals, universities can establish counseling and support services that are specifically tailored to the unique needs of the student population. Industry partnerships can also provide access to digital platforms and technologies that can be utilized to foster mental well-being, self-care, and stress management.

In addition to classroom innovation and mental health, we must also address the third critical aspect – students' well-being as a whole. Higher education institutions have a crucial role to play in nurturing the holistic development of their students. Student well-being encompasses physical health, emotional well-being, social connections, and a sense of belonging.

Industry collaboration can support initiatives that promote student well-being by providing resources and expertise in areas such as health and wellness programs, fitness facilities, and nutrition education. In addition, industry collaboration can decrease the anxiety of students by providing a real-life context in which they can identify professionally. Collaboration with industry leaders in the healthcare and wellness sectors can result in the development of comprehensive well-being programs that offer a range of services, including mental health support, physical activity, healthy eating, and stress management.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the redefinition of higher education spaces through industry collaboration is imperative for the success of tomorrow's higher education institutions. By embracing classroom innovation, mental health support, and students' well-being as crucial elements of education, universities can equip their students with the skills, knowledge, and support they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.

As we move forward post-pandemic, build an effective global learning ecosystem, harness the power of technology, care for and watch out for the effects of mental health deterioration . In doing so, we can continue to innovate to ensure a resilient and inclusive higher education system that embraces the world. As a Christian University, there is an even greater obligation to prepare students for lives of meaning and impact. We believe that every student has been created in the image of God and our job as a University is to steward God's gift of each students life so that they will find fulfillment and flourish throughout their careers as ambassadors of Christ in the world. The Trinity Western University vision is simple "Every Graduate is Equipped to Think Truthfully, Act Justly and Live Faithfully for the good of the world and the glory of God". If this sounds a little like Micah 6:8, you are not mistaken.

As we think about educational spaces, high quality learning, technological advances and the need to promote the thriving of our University graduates throughout life, let us embrace the power of collaboration and work together to redefine higher education spaces, ensuring that our students receive the best possible education and support. Trinity Western University and Afe Babalola University are building collaborations together to address global leadership, sustainability and empowerment and to increasingly provide global opportunities for students, faculty and industry alike. By bridging sectors, collaborating with industries, and working intentionally on issues of critical importance such as global leadership, empowerment and sustainability, we can create an educational ecosystem that not only meets the needs of the present but also prepares the next generation of equipped, empowered and thriving graduates for a successful and fulfilling future. For a better today and a stronger tomorrow. Thank you and God bless each one of you.