

Pascal:

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They say that change has never been as rapid as it is now, and yet it will never be that slow again. So why do we expect our universities to remain somehow immune to this? And with the emergence of AI, is there a future for us?

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After 35 years in university across three continents, I've come to believe that three myths are plaguing our sector, carried by people both inside and outside of universities.

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The first myth is that universities are somehow the pinnacle of advanced education, perfected by centuries of history. Not true. Universities were developed as a solution to a technological shortfall; it was for content sharing at a time when books were not readily available.

1:08

If we think about this particular challenge and this particular myth, should we feel threatened by another technological shortfall? And what is the place of universities in that future?

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The second myth is that universities are very special, very unique places of learning. Yet learning happens in lots of other places too, at different times, for different people. That's a good thing.

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So, if universities are not places of learning, maybe what they've become are institutions of teaching and research. We know from empirical evidence that their teaching is not entirely conducive of learning and that, at times, their research is riddled with inefficiencies and duplication.

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The third myth that is plaguing our sector is the belief that universities produce degrees. We don't; we produce graduates. There's very little value added in taking on very smart people and turning them into very smart graduates.

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The value we add is in making our students better learners when they leave us than when they came. This is a delta that represents our value.

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In fact, even the notion of higher education is somewhat flawed. There is no such thing as higher or lower education. There is education, and education is about creating and developing human potential—human capital.

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So let's not fall into the double trap of tradition and reminiscence. And let's try instead to turn our gaze 180 degrees to look at the future and get society ready for a future that is so comprehensively different from the past.

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Far from content sharing, we should curate it. What does curating content mean? It means assessing it for its accuracy, for its validity, and for its relevance.

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It's a disciplined, forensic approach that should be devoid of bias and emotion. It should be based on knowledge, it should be based on facts, and it should be based on data, and on that basis, it should actually give us a better understanding of everything around us.

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Now we add value by content curating simply because there is so much everywhere. That curation adds value in and of itself.

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But the other way in which we add value is actually in enabling our learners to become proficient curators themselves, so they can serve their employers, their communities, and their society in managing this plethora of information that we are surround by.

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Of course, doing these sort of things will have a profound impact on the way we teach and the way we evaluate our teaching. What's the point of testing a student about how much content they can retain and eventually regurgitate?

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More to the point, why should we select students on the basis on their capacity to stand very still in a quiet room with a pen in their hands, with no access to external information?

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Exams are patently not very good predictors of someone's capacity for future learning. Instead, practice is the way in which we can develop, establish, and demonstrate mastery.

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It is true for music, it is true for law, it is true for medicine, and it is true for a lot of the trades too. Practice is the way knowledge influences the world and the people around us.

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The best pedagogy for practice is patient, benevolent, and constructive mentorship. To become better educators, therefore we have to become better coaches of learning.

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So, there you have it: we should not respond to technological disruption with nostalgia. We should embrace it, and we should become better curators of knowledge and better coaches of learning.

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Of course, universities also contribute to the well-being of society through the research we do. Knowledge creation is very much in a sacred position in the firmament of intellectual pursuit.

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Indeed, humanity has benefited enormously from our capacity to observe, to measure, to test, to validate, to invalidate, to test again, and eventually come to some understanding about the universe and pretty much everything within it.

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Yet we have to think about the way in which that research needs to be developed. It needs to be breakthrough research, blue-sky research. It needs to be the research that humanity needs in order to survive and thrive.

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Unfortunately, in universities today, not all research meets those very exalted standards of discovery. I believe in the power of blue-sky research, and I believe the world needs those discoveries that brave and curious researchers will deliver in decades and centuries to come.

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But my point is that we should be discriminating. We should use public funding and university cross-subsidisation for truly groundbreaking research. Other types of research should be funded from other sources—donors, industry—because they are better placed to evaluate the merit, benefit, and eventually value of that research.

7:46

Now, the catalyst for questioning the future of university is the emergence of AI. Yet AI, combined with the ubiquity of online learning, has the potential to accelerate our research and, more importantly, to distribute it much more equitably for all.

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This resembles the vision of Teilhard de Chardin, a philosopher from France, who said in the early days of the 20th century that the next phase of human evolution would be what he called the noosphere—a state of shared cognition and reason.

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Educating everyone, regardless of gender, of age, of race, or of religion, and opening the door to a technology-rich future on a sustainable planet based on research that truly makes a difference in their lives.

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This, I believe, is a noble cause around which the future of universities should build. I think the world needs universities more now than ever before, but I also believe that the world doesn't need the universities we used to have.

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It needs universities that are different, dedicated to readying society for the future—universities where researchers and educators work together in order to prepare the next cohort of learners to address the challenges they will face.

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If universities have a future—and I passionately believe that they do— then I think; this is it. Thank you.