

The recent announcement by Google that a college degree isn't necessary for a job should trigger a long pending disruption of our education system, which churns out thousands of degree holders with good grades but not many employable skills.

Why do we need a degree as we know it today? What if we could have credentials without a university degree?

Think of the music industry. When music started to be sold by the song and not an album, the ensuing unbundling obliterated the industry's revenues. Imagine something similar happening in higher education with credentials being offered at the level of a skill rather than a degree.

This inflection should have occurred in education years ago.

At various points of time, experts had predicted that motion pictures, radio, television, computers and the internet would disrupt the existing model of education. In 2000, Fathom, which was an ill-fated online educational platform, attempted to become the first mover on this. Now we have MOOCs and millions of eager learners flocking to the likes of Udacity, Coursera and edX.

Remember that we are all paying for the degree inflation. The college degree, which is an unambiguous credential from an accredited institution, may well be the last barrier to entry standing between traditional education models and major disruption.

For many companies, degrees are a handy shortcut. If you want to reduce the number of resumes in your inbox, make some kind of credential (such as a bachelor's degree) a requirement – and in one fell swoop, the list of candidates will be shorter.

Making a degree the barrier to obtaining a good job creates a vicious cycle. More and more students are seeking a degree

IMAGE



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CAN WE DITCH OUR DEGREES?

Removing obstacles to finding jobs – Rita McGrath and Dr. Muneer Muhamed

and business hungry private institutions are getting rich by charging ever increasing fees.

The government is unable to meet the needs of the many who come out of schools every year. Students then resort to taking loans in the hope of finding gainful employment but the stagnant job market and an oversupply of candidates kill the hopes of hundreds of thousands of young people.

An added behavioural issue in Sri Lanka is that a qualified degree holder feels it's beneath his or her dignity to take a job that doesn't mandate such a qualification.

So that's why Google's announcement may be a harbinger for other companies to seek what we call 'new collar workers.' EY and IBM are experimenting with this, partly in response to an increasingly poor quality degree pool and partly to reduce the initial payroll burden.

Other forms of skill certification are providing an alternative to this perspective.

Sri Lanka should perhaps take a leaf out of Switzerland's book

where 70 percent of Grade 9 students take up vocational courses. They see apprenticeships as equally valuable for the founding of a good life and college is meant for jobs that genuinely require advanced classroom instruction – such as medicine or law.

Whenever a system has enough poorly served constituents, it's ripe for an inflection point. We believe that alternative forms of 'credentialling' where some respected accreditation body certifies the level of the skill will start gaining momentum. We're beginning to see the emergence of business models in this direction.

An ecosystem is unsuccessful when it fails to produce results for its constituents. However, the university system is protected by its control over the vital business of credentials. Alternative credentials are starting at the 'low end' of the education market with boot camps, online courses and short training sessions but the impact on established institutions will be greater over time.

So how can educational institutions transform their business in this disruptive era?

Arizona State University (ASU), which is consistently

ranked as the most innovative school, has been holistically making its programming relevant, useful and student friendly. It has the Starbucks College Achievement Plan, which provides tuition relief for Starbucks employees. Its Global Freshman Academy allows anyone to enrol online and transfer the credits back to ASU, and pay only when they complete the programme.

Other universities are also offering desired course experiences by combining technology platforms and impactful combos.

Northeastern University in Boston offers a popular coding and analytics boot camp, which is assessed by the success of its students, and Southern New Hampshire University is redirecting its attention to lifelong learners.

We are not suggesting that a carefully curated curriculum is bad. Instead, we're simply reiterating that students must be able to integrate what they learn with what's needed in practice. The dilemma is when the degree becomes an end in and of itself.

It may be too early to completely disrupt the university model as we know it; but it's certainly the right time for policy makers to keep a close watch on developments in alternative credentialling.



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