

## University Education in Transition

When I started my university studies in law and political science in the mid-1980s, it was not so easy to find updated information about the different academic courses either at the university's faculty library or the main library. Students had to rely on professors' own notations or handouts prepared for their lectures as well as some old-edition books. And journals with current publications or research on legal or political issues were practically absent. This was the reality of a public and poorly funded university, as well as the reality of a low-income law student like me living in the last years of a dictatorial government.

Despite the limited access to updated bibliographic sources, I was fortunate to have high-quality legal scholars teaching me the fundamentals of law and political science. I clearly remember my professor of penal procedural law, whose experience as judge granted him true academic authority to teach such an important course. His lessons were a mix of legal principles tested before the real legal practice, and all examinations he applied to his students were based on real judicial cases being dealt with in Panama courts. Certainly, after graduation, his students were ready to perform in the legal field.

In my opinion, that professor was an example on how university education should be conducted to provide students not only with theoretical principles of the subject matter but also practical tools to survive in the labor market. Unfortunately, not all professors have the same level of commitment to teach and prepare their students to advance a reasonably successful career; in fact, nowadays, a number of professors in many universities are void of vocation and limit their work to teach lessons within their assigned schedule without paying much attention if the students have learned any useful or concrete skill for their future professional development.

However, with the emergence of Internet in the mid-1990s, access to 24-hours updated information became a reality everywhere. From primary to university, teachers and students started to use Internet as a tool for information gathering to be used in their scope of work or study. And we have reached a level where computer programs are being designed to teach people different subjects without an instructor or the program itself has become the instructor. Indeed, Internet opened great opportunities in the area of education, making online learning a new avenue to acquire knowledge for practical purposes.

In addition, video tutorials became quite popular on the web. Rather than a book or lecture, a tutorial seeks to teach by example in an interactive manner to enable people to perform a specific task. Video tutorials has taught millions of people how to create and manage blogs or homepages, providing them with skills for different purposes, from just writing a diary, to teach a subject, to publish articles and opinions, to sell goods and services, among other.

Likewise, new platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet or Microsoft Team are already being widely used either for professional video conferencing, business meetings or university teaching in view of social distancing triggered by the coronavirus. In fact, these platforms will continue to grow well beyond the pandemic, and certainly, will require independent professionals as well as

people working in public and private organizations to master the use of this online tools in order to perform their jobs or to remain competitive in the market.

In fact, this new online wave is producing important changes in universities around the world, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, where online courses have become the new way of learning for millions of students and professionals. Prestigious universities such as Harvard, Cambridge, Stanford and MIT, just to mention a few, have been conducting open online courses to the public before the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, we have observed big companies such as Amazon, Microsoft, Google and IBM (also to mention a few) providing online courses to domestic and international audiences to teach how to use and apply their technology (Cloud, AI, IoT, etc.) across businesses and other activities.

We are not just witnessing the change in the university education methodology but also new organizations entering in the field of education to compete with universities. This competition is prompting many universities to transform themselves in various ways to survive in the education market.

In this connection, universities need to acquire online platforms to support courses in the same or different time zones. For courses taught to students in different time zones, they must provide a precise synchronization of teaching schedule and a secure system to prevent hacking or any illegal interception.

In addition, courses are evolving into shorter periods of time, with more practical lessons designed to prepare students immediately for the labor market or train professionals in new working skills.

In the traditional system, student spend four years in an average university, and once hired by any company, he/she does not have practical skills to immediately perform specific tasks. Therefore, companies need to provide additional training, and even reinforcement of writing skills. As a result, practical-oriented short courses online, provided by other organizations, are attracting more students and professionals who benefit of true value-added courses.

Moreover, teaching and administration staff must be trained in the use of online platforms. In this regard, professors must be able to upload and distribute teaching materials as well as to make proper evaluations of students' tests and assignments on the platform. Students also must receive proper guidance on the use of the platform as well as receive their grades and other academic information online.

For universities outside the English-speaking countries, professors must count on a good level of English to deliver lectures to foreign students. Likewise, staff at the international affairs department of universities must be fully bilingual to communicate and be able to manage international academic programs.

It is also important for universities to develop a cooperation scheme with companies to connect the academic and research processes with the productive forces of society. In this regard, universities will be able to better understand socio-economic processes, and therefore, prepare students to perform well in the labor market.

In Japan, I have observed universities making efforts to transition from the traditional system to the new online era, as well as incorporating English languages courses to their syllabus like Sophia University; or Chiba University partnering with a private company to offer Panama coffee in its cafeteria or offering short online programs to its students in English in partnership with foreign universities to expand students' international opportunities.

In Panama, I have also noticed the progressive management of Panama Technological University offering online courses to foreign students in English or collaborating with productive forces of society with the purpose of creating better job opportunities for its students.

Certainly, in-person lessons will reassume as the pandemic fades away, but now these lessons have to be complemented with the use of online tools and students, teaching and administration staff must be ready to manage them.

Universities with a visionary leadership will survive and adapt to the new digital age while those attached to the old ways will naturally pass away.

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