MOVING IN TIME TO A DIGITAL TUNE: A CRISIS IN OUR IDENTITY?

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ABSTRACT

The higher educational landscape nationally and internationally has changed over the last decades, moving from an elite to a mass higher educational system (Trow,1984). Currently this system and the organisations within it are contending with new external influences on their future structure—the arrival of the technological revolution and digitalisation of learning. Technology has taken global access to our living rooms. Many embrace digitalisation of learning, but others are not so positive. Using identity theory, we examine the potential impact of this shift within the Institute of Technology sector in the Republic of Ireland with a particular emphasis on exploring the impact of learning technology on organisational and academic identity, concluding that exploring this impact is the first step on the journey of digitalisation of learning.

KEYWORDS

Digitalisation of learning, image, identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of higher education is the belief in individual and societal value, where theorists cite benefits including economic returns, improved life outcomes, and opportunities for individuals (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1991). This is supported within the Republic of Ireland as is evidenced in the most recent higher educational landscape strategy, where it concludes:

> "Higher education is central to the economic renewal we need to support individual well-being and social development… The quality of their learning experiences and the environment in which students learn will shape the future development of our society. They are also citizens who will add to the richness of society – as parents, community leaders and teachers– and in their chosen area of work they will be the productive engine of and prosperous economy" (Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2011; p. 9).

The impact of this agenda on individual higher educational institutions is the requirement to provide programmes of learning that meet the needs of society and the learner. This has led institutions to reflect on the business they are in, how they are doing, what they are doing, and should they be doing something else to achieve the above. Such reflections have led to the realisation that the space higher education exists in has shifted and will continue to shift in the future, where Ireland's higher educational system must become more flexible in provisions of both time and place and one that facilitates transfer and progression through all levels of the system (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2011).

With this comes the understanding that flexibility and accessibility of provisions are limited within this space, where programmes of learning are primarily delivered face to face within specific institutions (HEA, 2011; p. 38). Recently, however, there are isolated examples of programmes that are available on a flexible online basis. This use of digitalisation to make learning more accessible is advocated at government level, where the sector undergoing transformation concludes that in "the years ahead, students will choose to learn in a variety of ways– full-time or part-time; on campus or off campus; class room based, blended, online or accelerated learning" (HEA, 2012; p. 54).

Therefore, the question has emerged as to whether institutions are ready for this shift into flexible and more accessible learning, which represents a significant cultural and operational challenge. Are they able to reshape themselves to embrace rather than rebuff this agenda? (McCarthy and Samors 2009). This is tandem with our children who are growing up as digital natives (Presnky, 2001; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2012) and as such will support the notion of a digitally based pedagogy even from a young age (McTaggart, Cavaliero, and Pender, 2014). With some theorists concluding that not only will it improve the flexibility and accessibility of higher education, but it will also ensure that today's teaching and learning is delivered in a way that is relevant to today's population by offering the potential to reach out and engage 'the other half' of the young population as well as to reach out to adults who have not previously benefitted from higher education. Therefore, the belief is that this will provide a fairer, faster higher educational system that is more in tune with contemporary society (O'Connor, 2007; Selwyn, 2014).

Evidence would indicate that, even within this acknowledged potential, concerns exist regarding the impact of digitalisation on the notion and legitimacy of higher education institutions. This paper examines these concerns by exploring the impact of digitalisation on the identity of both the organisation and the academic, with the goal of providing a knowledge base that will help to successfully manage this shifting space within the Institute of Technology (IOT) sector in the Republic of Ireland. As the stronger an organisation's identity, the better their knowledge, attitude, and behaviour regarding the achievement of organisational objectives.

2. LOCAL CONTEXT

The Republic of Ireland's higher educational system has been loosely considered a binary system (two higher education institution types) in that the majority of provisions exist in the traditional unified university sector of which there are seven or more applied and career-focused IOT's (14) (Mulcahy, 1981; Lillis and Morgan, 2012). While they still have an underlying core ethos of vocational and technical programmes from their originations as regional technical colleges, the IOT sector is now similar to their university colleagues, as they too have the authority to deliver degrees at undergraduate, masters and doctorate level. Some can do this independently; others require validation by the Higher Education and Training Council (Taylor, Brites Ferreira, de Lourdes Machado, Santiago). In addition to the main higher education providers above, a number of other third-level institutions deliver specialist education in fields such as art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music, and law.

From a geographical perspective, three of the universities are located in the capital city, Dublin, an additional university is in Co. Dublin, and the remaining three are located in the largest cities in the country: Cork, Limerick, and Galway. Comparatively, IOT's (similar to historical poly techs in the United Kingdom) are more regional in focus, located often in areas of higher unemployment and social disadvantage (Burns, 2013).

Participation in higher educational programmes of learning has risen steadily from a base of full-time enrolment in 1967 of 21,000 to its most recent figures of over 160,000 full-time enrolments (Orichesta Research and Library Service, 2014). This indicates that 50-55% of 17 to 18 year olds enter higher education (O'Connor, 2007). In a breakdown, the IOT studentship makes up almost half of the higher educational provision with University studentship numbers at just under 77,000 and IOT's at just over 73,000 (Orichesta Research and Library Service, 2014).

While these figures are positive, the profiles of the learner groups who attend particular higher education institutions are different. The university sector has traditionally espoused the values of elite higher education, while the IOT's are pluralist and as a such are more reflective of a mass higher educational system, where a significant proportion of their student cohorts are non-traditional and/or are the first generation to higher education (Mooney Patterson, O'Connor, and Chantler, 2010). Within this frame changes are underway in the IOT sector, where if these institutions meet a number of key requirements, including capacity (critical mass student numbers and future protections), capability (staff qualifications and research), and expertise, the HEA has committed to allowing them to apply to become a technological university. This technological university is intended to be:

"(Internationally, a technological university is) a higher education institution that operates at the highest academic level in an environment that is specifically focused on technology and its application" (HEA, 2011; p. 103).

Meeting the criteria of capacity and critical mass will require institutes of technology to merge often with significant geographical distances between. Consequently, the role of digitalisation not only supports the needs of modern day learning and non-traditional study arrangements (part-time, e-learning, etc.); but also supports a restructure of the sector, which is now at the forefront of institutional agenda. This is not necessarily to allow for programme rationalisation, but to allow students accessibility to programmes from a wider campus than may be possible in their own regionally based campus, thus meeting the capacity requirement (HEA, 2011; Marginson Report 2011; p. 28) and ensuring fit for purpose in a rapidly changing, globalised world.

A small number of institutions have embarked on this journey and have submitted their expression of interest. Some have progressed to Stage 3 i.e. Evaluation of Plan stage of this process; however, concerns still exist within the entire IOT sector regarding what this restructure and these requirements will mean to all key stakeholders inclusive of the organisation itself and its academics. Anecdotally, the part that appears to evoke significant fear is the role and the method that digitalisation of learning may play in restructuring of the sector.

3. IDENTIFYING AND IDENTITY

While research clearly indicates that digitalisation will not cause the disappearance of campus-based teaching and learning, it will transform the way education is delivered and supported (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). From an organisational perspective, the principal direct impact of digitalisation and learning technology is the scope to significantly change how higher education delivers in terms of volume and distance. Specifically, the ability to reach a greater number of students with fewer resources and to reach students over much longer distances while maintaining direct interaction in real time through shared online spaces is possible (HEA, 2011; University UK, 2014). While this has its advantages in terms of critical mass and economic opportunities, the impact on how such a shift can cause confusion to existing organisational identity should not be ignored. Organisational identity is understood as shared beliefs about the organisation's central enduring and distinctive characteristics (Bauman, 1996; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, and Garud, 1999), which can enhance organisational effectiveness and performance and serve as a source of sustained competitive advantage (Barney, Bunderson, Foreman, Gustafson, Huff, Martins, Reger, Saranson, and Stimpert., 1998). This identity is shared by members and is created and developed through a continuous process of claims and counterclaims regarding the concept of what the organisation is (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). This leads to the question, what it a university, and what is an IOT?

By allowing and facilitating students to not attend a classroom and as such move to something that we cannot identify with in terms of the normative student experience where students are educated not within a physical structure, this challenges the traditional image of higher education, its distinctive characteristics, and its abstract and concrete identity (Reger, 1998). Abstract identity is understood as components that help to establish an organisation's context and reflect their culture and values that transcend over time (i.e., why we do what we do in the way we do) as well as the legacy of it. Concrete identity elements are tied to a particular time and set of environmental conditions, product strategies, and environment scope (i.e., tied to the historical perception of higher education and elitism pluralism) (Stimpert, Gustafson, and Sarason, 1998; p. 91).

Additionally, within the IOT sector, abstract and concrete identities (Stimpert et al., 1998) are based on foundations and legacies from regional technical colleges, where it has held and continues to hold, the value and belief that they are local institutions who serve the needs of local populations. Consequently, this shift to technological university status requires a critical mass and an improved use of technology to support learning opportunities, which may challenge the notion of what is local, may be inconsistent with those expectations, and has the potential to create tension within the organisation and within the sector (Golden-Biddle et al., 1997). Selwyn sums this up by concluding that digital technologies challenge and question the very essence of what is a university (Selywn, 2014). On this occasion, the introduction and use of digitalisation that deviates from the expectations associated with this organisation's identity are challenging, as identity is

intertwined in the routines, procedures, and beliefs of both organisational and external bodies, and efforts to shift identity in order to accommodate identity-challenging technology are difficult to achieve (Tripsas, 2009).

Equally, organisations gain legitimacy with internal and external stakeholders when they demonstrate the normative identity of (in this case) higher education, but this can cause unease if it varies too much from what is expected from the organisation (Navis and Glynn, 2011).

4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE EDUCATOR?

A key part of organisational identity is that of those who teach in that space and their academic identities, which (at the core) relate to teaching and research activities that they deliver (Deem 2006, p. 204). While much of this identity is informed by disciplinary specific knowledge commonalties in values and beliefs are believed to exist, these include but are not limited to academic freedom, the community of scholars, individual autonomy, and service to society through the production of knowledge, transmission of culture, and education of the young (Kuh and Whitt, 1986, p. 76; Whitechurch and Gordon, 2010). The introduction of any new change challenges and redefines some or all of these values: freedom, autonomy, and transmission of culture. None could be seen as more challenging than the introduction of technology to support digitilisation of learning (Adams, 2012), which ultimately impacts on their symbolic order, understood as "the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1989, p.17). This order allows academics to recognise themselves in, or identify with, the image presented in the ideology and behave accordingly to who they are within a given context (Zizek, 1989 pp. 43-44; Runions, 2000; p. 197).

This challenge to identity is exacerbated by the generation gap of the technological revolution. While most who teach are of the generation of the digital immigrant, this is at sea to our digitally native students who currently use technology based devices earlier than they hold a pencil and often with more ease and proficiency (Lauricella, 2011). Added to this is the reality that "academics form an unusually independent profession, one that draws heavily on traditional ideals about its proper role even as its present-day operating realities in many countries have become increasingly diverse" (El-Khawas, 2002). A tradition of traditionalism is asked to embrace something that is inherently different, which many feel impacts on their legitimacy; it is easy to see why anxiety can and does occur (Levy, 2003). This ultimately compels those delivering programmes to confront existing assumptions of teaching and learning in higher education (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

5. IDENTITY REFORMATION

While firms and (in this case) higher education institutes have a current understanding of organisational identity, they also have a desired or ideal concept of identity (Stimpert, Gustasfon and Sarson, 1998). This existence of an identity gap can be useful in a transformation process. On this occasion, members of the organisation and stakeholder groups can be supported to develop a conceptualised identity that embraces digitalisation in a newly configured technological university. Successful strategy renewals can allow an organisation to discard some concrete identities that are no longer of value, while simultaneously adding new concrete attributes that build on the abstract identity attributes and offer the potential of new advantages. Within this IOT transformation process this could include building on the abstract identity that accords the value of education and is entwined with the organisational belief system of making higher education more accessible to non-traditional groups. This philosophy can be supported through digitalisation's ability to increase student capacity in a medium that is relevant for today's population. This change will add a competitive advantage to the concrete identity, while preserving a number of unique characteristics (Gioia, 1998; p. 22).

The concept of organisational identity, therefore, motivates actions as well as strategic choices (Ashforth and Mael, 1996) and is something that should be considered. Identity is who we are and the current and future strategy details with the actions to take us to who we are to become, "a generator for strategies, a screen, a constraint, a filter, an enabler and an influence on strategy" (Barney et al., 1998; p. 166). This is a lesson that can be learned in the current shift within Ireland. The key is to ensure communication and training to support the shift, while maintaining the symbolic capital that is imperative to support and protect the identity of the organisation and its members (Henkel, 2005).

For those who have taken this leap, the new place has proven not that scary, recognising that this change is occurring and the reality is that if we do not embrace it, we run the risk of being left behind.

6. CONCLUSION

While the future higher educational landscape remains unclear, early research indicates that we will remain the same, but different than what we were. This will be the greatest challenge to accept—challenging the notion of our identity. This will provide institutions with the opportunity to contribute to a new identity formation, taking into consideration shifts that are inevitable due to the arrival of the digital age, to be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat. We must imagine our future within this new future of the technological university where technology will be the key to its success, not demise. The potential of digitilisation to facilitate the accessibility of education to those who may not get this opportunity is one advantage, but another advantage is the potential of digitilsation to change the way we do what we do. If considered a tool to support effective pedagogy, it can become less threatening and may have little impact on the identity of the lecturer. The future of who and what we can be should be the early focus of any restructure with the vision not constrained by what we can do, but inspired by possibilities and opportunities.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

A next phase in exploring the impact of digitalisation of learning on academic identity within the IOT sector requires the collection of primary data in this field. This has commenced, where the author is currently undertaking an interpretive study with a number of participants who recently began their journey to digitalise their pedagogy and programmes within a case study institute. The study, through participants own narrative, examines their pre-knowledge and expertise in this area, their experiences before and during this process, any barriers or supports to this change in their pedagogy, its impact on their academic identity and any recommendations they may have to make this transition a success into the future.

Early results indicate that the key to the success in this transition process is training, mentoring and support before such a change occurs, where participants concluded that such training reduces the anxiety and threat that this transition can bring to them and their professional identity.

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