Book Review:

The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education Richard Frederick Heller (2022) The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education. Singapore: Springer. ISBN: 978-981-16-6505-9, 80 pp.

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The question of whether universities will survive in the 21st century is not as easy to answer as it might initially appear. Although, the fact that universities have survived for over a millennium is often touted as reason enough for their sustenance. However, the rate of social change and development over the past decades has called the probability of universities lasting for another thousand years to question. The tremendous growth and transformation that have followed rapid advances in communications and information technologies, including computing and mobile technologies have significantly impacted different areas of societal development. Thus, the question is, will universities and other higher education institutions retain the familiar structural organisation of the mid to late 20th century in the future? Providers of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and open educational resources (OER) have changed the landscape of teaching and learning in various fields, especially in computing and business studies. It is no longer essential to obtain 4 or 5-year degrees to be eligible for certain lucrative roles once you present a short certification in the desired subject area and you can 'defend' the certificate or badge with proficiency skills in the area. The locale of problem-solving for persistent human social problems such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic has left universities and the rest of higher education. Educational institutions seem to be playing catch up to the industries and the corporate sector that have provided sustained

leadership in fostering social change across different spheres of human endeavour. If this persists what will be the fate of university degrees as we know it? Numerous analysts have advocated greater attention to issues of institutional reorganization in higher education. Some others have given thought to the issue of micro-credentialing as a functional means of delivering education and training in a distributed yet organized way. The notion of distributed learning and by extension, a distributed university organization has been around for about a decade as a possible approach to reorganizing contemporary higher education delivery systems.

This book deals with different dimensions of the distributed university as a catalyst for sustainable higher education. The author takes off with a discourse on the place of universities in the wider education system and traces what he calls the first to the fourth generation of universities. He observes that beyond the notion of individual university governance and national accreditation systems, there are broader issues such as fairness and equity and environmental sustainability that cuts across universities in different societies. This book is a short handy book organized into five short chapters.

Chapter one titled, Some Contexts - from first to fourth generation universities, examined the evolution of universities. The author noted the tension between the consumer and community as key variables in the organization of universities and the approach adopted in achieving their avowed goals.

Chapter two is titled, the problem with Universities Today, and identifies some key problems associated with the universities of today. Although admittedly from the perspective of an academic, which is that of a single stakeholder type. The challenges enunciated include, managerialism creates burdens for academics with no evidence of benefit; business imperatives override educational imperatives; needless competition between universities leads to duplication; research imperatives, including academic advancement, override educational reward systems; local educational needs are ignored for overseas student income; global inequalities in educational need are

ignored; universities have not kept up with the way young people gain information; environmental sustainability is ignored.

Chapter three focused on Solutions. The author recommends that universities develop a system of trust in academic staff to replace managerialism, replace competition with collaboration and adopt a global perspective on educational inequalities. Drawing from personal experience of the erosion of personal autonomy by excessive managerialism, the author recommends a system of trust in the academics that have been recruited by the university to do the job for which they were recruited conscientiously.   The need to embrace collaboration as an important and measurable educational outcome to change the culture within educational organisations was emphasized. Suggestions for different kinds of collaborations were offered, including, collaboration within an individual university, collaboration between universities, collaboration between universities and other organisations, and international collaborations. He further recommends an international baccalaureate for higher education. Including utilizing volunteers as untapped educators, and moving to online learning. Place education in a framework of environmental sustainability - the distributed university. Use open educational resources and take advantage of modern technology and the fourth industrial revolution. There is a call for universities to develop a truly global perspective to reduce global inequalities in access, to and benefit from, higher education. Another recommendation is to reduce reliance on overseas student fees and develop a global online learning programme. Promote plan E for education, increasing online public access to higher education. It is uncertain whether this solution applies to distance learning systems that are not constrained by geographical, and/or social restrictions.

Chapter four, aptly titled, "But how can we afford it?" is concerned with the financial sustainability of higher education models that are currently in force. The author believes that the issues and suggestions raised in the book are inexpensive and are cost-saving recommendations.   The first recommendation is to separate teaching and research funds and functions in the university. Heller argues that research must not be promoted at the expense of teaching as is often

the practice across many higher education systems. He further suggests that trust should be the major mechanism for promoting quality and not the corporate world managerialism that seems to be the order of the day across many university systems globally. He recommends the complete overhauling of educational processes to accommodate key actors that are sometimes left out of the orbit of higher education processes and practice, such as volunteering, and embracing new technologies and innovations as central parts of university processes. The notion of volunteering is not presently popular among people in low and middle-income countries. Volunteers often come from the global north to offer services to people in these areas. It may not be fair to academics from low-income countries to be asked to offer their services on a volunteer basis, given that their incomes are barely meeting their need for subsistence.

Chapter five, which is also the final chapter, titled A Case Study – Peoples-uni and Conclusion - presents a case study of a global educational programme that the author had participated in as an illustration of some of the key issues that have been examined in this publication. The university operates fully online and offers courses in public health in low and middle-income countries. Peoples-uni exemplifies the concept of 'distributed' to mean the distribution of education and knowledge to locations where it is required as a strategy for eliminating global inequalities and promoting local relevance of key knowledge. The peoples-uni model is regarded as sustainable because it reduces the impact on the environment, and distributes trust in place of managerialism and collaboration in place of competition. The model distributes education online and sets up the higher education sector to adapt to the changes in the ways we work and learn in the current milieu.

This book's examination of the practices of higher education and the problems associated with universities today will be of interest to higher education analysts in general and distance education researchers, in particular. The author's recommendations for creating a sustainable distributed institution higher education, or university model, will appeal to distance education practitioners, policymakers, educational technologists, government officers, and researchers. The book deepens

our understanding of the policy framing and funding issues relative to the governance and operation of sustainable distributed higher education institutions. I strongly recommend it to anyone who may have an interest in open, distance, distributed, digital learning systems or who are concerned about planning and developing distributed digital learning systems and policies.