
higher education futures?

universities are changing rapidly and radically...

... the idea of university is being quietly renegotiated

Prof Stephen Heppell - Monday, 12 October 2026

preamble

Higher Education, which historically has been dominantly the role of universities, is changing.: what counts as learning; who pays for it; where it happens; who benefits; how quality is recognised; when in a lifetime it occurs; are all subject to review.

One way to explore those changes is to describe the many various “brands” now emerging. Importantly in the new world of HE learning there is no single “right way”, and many permutations of these brands, but very clearly the model that dominated in the past is not the only direction. going forwards,. Some emerging brands are very radical indeed.

A previous “HE futures” paper might have simply explored: how can we make tomorrow’s university better incrementally and financially viable? Today’s more fundamental question might be “how do we want a university to function in the first place?. The “brands” are:

1. Micro-accreditation and stackable credentials
2. Work-integrated degrees and degree apprenticeships
3. Education as a talent-attraction strategy
4. Designed-to-be-online learning
5. The lifelong-learning university
6. Accreditation of prior learning and experience
7. Permeable academic and vocational pathways
8. AI-personalised learning
9. Interdisciplinary, polymathic and challenge-based degrees
10. The university as an innovation ecosystem
11. Transnational and networked universities
12. The unbundled university
13. Defence linked ingenuity and technology engines
14. Exhibition and performance based broad institutions
15. The community located, green-transition university
16. The university without end
17. The keep calm and carry on university

The 15 emerging global HE brands

A synthesis of international developments, rather than a formal ranking. Examples illustrate the direction of travel, not necessarily universal adoption.

1. Micro-accreditation and stackable credentials

Short, assessed learning units earn recognised credit and can accumulate towards larger qualifications without overall time limits.

The ambition is to make learning more granular without making it disposable. Watch Finland, Estonia and Ireland.



2. Work-integrated degrees and degree apprenticeships

Study and paid employment become complementary parts of one qualification, with workplace learning properly assessed and accredited.

Ultralab's Ultraversity pioneered this model in 1996. Germany's dual-study model is an especially interesting example; the UK, Australia and India are also currently expanding these models.

3. Education as a talent-attraction strategy

Countries use tuition policy including wholly free tuition, paid scholarships, living-cost support and post-study work opportunities to attract (clever) people with valuable skills and encourage them to stay..

Examples include Finland, Norway and Germany who each operate variations of these approaches, This strategy is as much



migration and economic policy as education policy.

4. Designed-to-be-online learning

The online shift is from broadcasting pastiche lectures (especially during COVID), to building courses around a remote, typically asynchronous, less linear solution.

The new approaches instead feature interaction, feedback, simulation, agency, collaboration and independent pacing. Synchronicity is limited perhaps only to the start and end of units.

Online becomes a pedagogical design choice, - an alternative - not simply a subset of face to face practice via a cheaper delivery channel.



5. Lifelong-learning university including school ecosystem

Institutions increasingly serve people throughout their learning and their careers, not just school-leavers but in a whole life fusion of function with schools and employment.

Mid-career re-skilling, career changes, portfolio careers and periodic returns-to-study become part of the institution's core mission. Schools may be an integral part of the university.

These institutions or faculties never lose touch with their alumni who are central to their business model. Alumni may also be drafted in as mentors, guests, or experts in some

instances. This starts at school entry at 5 years and are seamlessly part of the whole.

6. Accreditation of prior learning and experience

Learners receive credit for demonstrable capability gained through work, independent study or previous experience.

This may be a broad portfolio but fundamentally the important change is from asking “where and what



did you learn?” to “what can you demonstrate?”. Moving from valuing a CV to viewing records of an exhibition, or a portfolio as is already in place for example in architecture degrees. An institution might act as an single aggregator for fragmented courses across an entire sector (eg all ship related maritime courses and experience)

7. Permeable academic and vocational pathways

Routes between apprenticeships, technical colleges, professional qualifications and universities become easier and more legitimate. Not just backwards and forwards between levels, but overlapping and combining.

Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands offer useful models. This is very much equality through a parity of possibility: the route taken or the starting point need not determine the destination.



8. AI-personalised learning



AI increasingly supports individual explanations, feedback, tutoring, practice and adaptive pathways.

As yet it does a poor job with collaborative endeavour other than to be one of the team.

This AI “brand” obviously needs a much more detailed description but where some universities are running from the

“threat” that AI poses to veracity, quality, etc, others are embracing it so that students emerge with a proper perspective of what AI is good at, what people are good at and what together they might newly achieve..

It is clearly possible to make support more responsive at scale, while keeping human judgement, intimacy, relationships, ambition and academic integrity central.

9. Interdisciplinary, polymathic and challenge-based.

In this brand, students work and learn across disciplinary boundaries on complex problems rather than studying exclusively within established academic silos.

There are already intentionally polymathic degrees available. Climate, health, AI, sport and urban futures provide natural settings for combining technical knowledge, creativity and social understanding.



Obviously this is a likely development in parallel with micro-accreditation.

10. The university as an innovation ecosystem



Universities increasingly connect students with start-ups, employers, public services and research partners to develop and test ideas.

They also act as a catalyst for innovation with younger school students, cueing them up for the degree ahead.

Enterprise is not just a business-school subject: it becomes a way of learning through making, risk taking,

experimentation and through grounded real-world problem-solving.

One caveat missed by many institutions who shelter start-ups and embrace innovation: the institution itself must model enterprise and innovation; institutional advance will need to be a project in its own right.

11. Transnational and networked universities

Learners access international partnerships, joint degrees and teaching across institutional boundaries, often without relocating. These transnational and transcultural connections are a core part of the networked university offering, not extras.

Students are members of, and are active within, a genuinely international education. Global not local in relationships although local issues and needs may often remain a focus where appropriate.



12. The unbundled university



Essentially it is just an overarching branding, quality licensing, organisation aggregating and awarding HE level activity.

Teaching, assessment, research supervision and certification intentionally come from diverse multiple institutions and indeed sectors. That could be full modules, micro-accreditations, project

outcomes or indeed anything provided by the newly evolved higher education sector. Think of it as an Amazon of HE. Likely to become as large too. As with Amazon it is the software behind the offer that allows efficiency and scale.

Students themselves need to identify and articulate the narrative of their own chosen pathway/s. The institution archives and validates them. Fundamentally routes to qualification are the responsibility of the students but new tech tools provide the ability to defend and assure quality, institutionally and individually.

13. Defence linked ingenuity and technology engines



It has become recently apparent - inevitably from developments in Ukraine, Iran and others - that small scale ingenuity and creativity can, in some circumstances, overwhelm large scale armaments and munitions. Smart beats Substantial in defence terms.

Institutions will emerge with a specific remit to engender

the scarce and valued capabilities of effective collaborative endeavour, ingenuity, creativity, deep thinking, entrepreneurialism, risk management and more. Both Defence and the wider economy (for example Health) need these for survival. Funding is likely to be via national defence spending and will be substantial. The Spanish government would need to spend around €4 billion more a year to reach the 2% NATO defence target. Total university sector spending is €10+ billion so diverting some of that extra defence spending would have a huge impact.

14. Exhibition and performance based broad institutions

In creative arts - music, sculpture, drama et al - a largely performance based curriculum has been established for many years. But as the pendulum swings back from knowledge-led to a greater emphasis on what is done with that knowledge, and as AI damages outcomes like the essay, we might predict that portfolios, performances, projects, simulations and real-world challenges will



supplement and even replace conventional assessments like examinations or papers. Employers and universities will value richer evidence of what a learner can actually do, not just what they can reproduce under test conditions, or within a target word count. MIT is already moving from the essay to vivas as part of their response to AI..

15. The community located, green-transition university

Universities increasingly connect teaching and research to regional regeneration, to social and natural sustainability and to public challenges. The university might become literally the heart of its region or community.

Their contribution and value, perhaps also their income, is measured partly by what changes in their communities, not solely by graduate salaries, publications or international rankings.



16. The university without end



A qualification / institution here would essentially provides a pipeline rather than a destination. You join the Master level community, for example, and all activities, seminars, courses, collaborations, conversations, exchanges, outputs are at that level. You may return and return to those activities for many years. Over time there may be routes to a named qualification (as for example with PhD by exegesis where a log or diary is the

artefact presented) but essentially that is not the primary purpose. You are there for the ride not for arrival. Fundamentally, it is a club for activity at a common and quality assured level. Same with undergraduate or even post doctoral levels. A membership fee would be low compared to current standard tuition fee models but it has the potential for substantial income levels.

17. The keep calm and carry on university

Some universities offer quite wonderful student experiences - everything from architecture to tradition play. Recruitment is steady, income is holding up, reserves are substantial, reputation is stellar. There is no reason to assume that they will not continue to be part of the mix of higher education offerings around the world. But they won't be the only ones going forward and remembering how complacent excellent bookshops were as Amazon started to grow, maybe this is a time to keep eyes on the horizon and get on the ground?

some general vectors of change in HE

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- **From courses to capabilities:** micro-credentials, prior-learning recognition, exhibition, skills evidence.
 - **From institutions to learning ecosystems:** work-integrated degrees, permeable pathways, lifelong learning, transnational partnerships and unbundled provision.
 - **From credentials to contribution:** challenge-based learning, innovation, civic purpose and ingenuity.

scale

To keep a sense of proportion, some numbers:

- About 6.7% of people worldwide (roughly 549 million people out of an estimated global population of 8.2 billion) have an undergraduate degree or equivalent.
- About 93.3% of people worldwide (roughly 7.65 billion people) don't.
- By country that ranges from under 1% in some developing nations to over 40%–60% in select high-income OECD countries

That suggests where the growth, scale and innovation will come from.

universities that don't exist yet

The question of who will win the race to most successfully embrace some of these brands and vectors has a clear answer.

It will be:

- either a new or “young” university (so not troubled by legacy systems and reputations);
- almost certainly private (so less troubled by civil service / public finance constraints) rather than state funded;
- an education group already encompassing schools, universities and commerce;
- and with a transnational reach.

Arguably, these are most likely to emerge in “newer” economies in South East Asia, South America, Africa, Middle East etc.

Professor Stephen Heppell October 2026