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Selecting A Suitable Approach To Analyze The Future Of Higher Education

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Abstract

How are higher education organizations going to cope with the challenges of a society that is continuously changing? Although the education sector needs to adapt to technological and socioeconomic changes, methodologies on which we have relied in the past will not be adequate in the future. In fact, the past represents just one of an infinite number of possible outcomes and the future may involve a completely different framework. As a consequence, we should attempt to identify an appropriate technique for analyzing higher education in the future.

This paper aims to identify the advances and new trends that will allow the definition of a new model for higher education. A crucial paradox is also outlined: whether the witnessed never-before-seen democratization in the accessibility to higher education is going to co-exist in the future with a possible scenario that might restrict its access because of increasing competition and concentration of higher education organizations.

We posit that the quantum approach to time and change (QATC) is a suitable approach that helps to set out the future scenario where the current educational model will be called into question; it is also a key tool for studying the relationship between higher education and society.

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1. Introduction

The society in which we live is changing rapidly and these changes are characterized by the leading role played by innovation and its diffusion, the emphasis on information and the importance of knowledge (Hitt, 1998). Accordingly, the educational system and, in particular, higher education must also change. Universities and other higher education organizations must be prepared for the challenges to the way in which they create and transmit knowledge and information arising from such innovation. This is one of the reasons why change and innovation have become issues of major interest in recent years.

As with other fields of the reality around us, the education sector is aware of new technologies and needs to adapt to technological and socioeconomic changes. But will higher education completely adapt to this progress? The terms e-learning, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), competences, etc. are commonly used nowadays but not so long ago they were largely unknown or nonexistent. We know what the higher education model looks like, but will we continue to see this model in the future? We hypothesize that new generations' understanding of higher education will differ from that of the current generation and, as a consequence, we should attempt to identify a suitable approach for analyzing higher education in the future. Thus, the present paper aims to identify the advances and new trends that will allow the definition of a new model for higher education.

We argue that a more complex environment, mainly due to globalization and the Digital Revolution, calls for more sophisticated techniques. The quantum theory applied to social sciences will help us to set out the future scenario where the current educational model will be called into question. Along the lines of Pallas (2011), who states that “most school reform efforts are destined to fail because they are unable to address the increasing power of markets and consumer demand in the shaping of how schools and colleges work”, we believe that if we are not able to understand the future of higher education and its organizations, future education reforms will fail. Doing so requires a new framework.

Zohar (1998) applies quantum physics to organizations, while Erçetin and Kamacı (2008) reflected quantum theory in leadership by defining a new paradigm. More recently, Lord et al. (2015) illustrate how principles of quantum physics can be applied to organizational issues. Their article has many applications and, in our view, has important practical and policy implications for the field of higher education. The quantum approach is a powerful framework, as it allows us to create a number of futures that may require the enactment of different sets of constraints from those being used in the present. This perspective presents advantages in comparison with the traditional models. Then, ours is an original and innovative approach with respect to both education and society.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we discuss the challenges faced by both society and higher education organizations. Secondly, we analyze whether the quantum approach might be considered a suitable approach for studying the future of these organizations and, eventually, of higher education. Finally, the last section concludes.

2. Higher Education Organizations: Past, Present And Future

There were two papers in the second half of the 90s that predicted some of the changes that we are currently experiencing. First, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1998) discussed the implications of the changing undergraduate student population, the shrinking financial support for higher education (and the relevance of considering the benefits as well as the costs) and the rise of information technology. These authors pointed out that “the research questions, designs, and methodologies on which we have relied in the past will not be adequate in the future. We must look to adapt them to the changing conditions and to develop new designs and methods” (p. 163). Second, Michael Hitt (1998) noted that new technologies affect how we teach and research. As predicted by this author, the way we teach students in 2016 is dramatically different from the way we did so in 1997: the global emphasis on higher education and on e-learning has played an important role in this regard.

Here we have a key element in our society: the speed of change. In fact, even as we are still getting used to electronic means of learning (e-learning), we see the emergence and spread of new realities such as b-learning (blended learning), m-learning (using mobile devices) and even a transition to u-learning (using any technological resource). Take, for instance, the use of virtual platforms or the meteoric rise of on-line courses and MOOCs.

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