

Globalised H.E. and digitised professions

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Philip G. Altbach *Global Perspectives on Higher Education*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016

Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind, *The Future of the professions, How technology will transform the work of human experts*, Oxford University Press, 2015

There are more than 200 million students enrolled in postsecondary education worldwide and their number is expected to more than double by 2030, Philip Altbach tells us (p6). It is the new norm for the world's youth and his book presents a comprehensive account of contemporary postsecondary education worldwide.

Like nearly everybody else in the world, Altbach and his colleagues, who share in some of the chapters, talk about 'postsecondary' or 'tertiary education', since secondary schools in most countries provide a generalist pre-vocational foundation and tertiary colleges or universities provide specialist vocational preparation for inclusion in communities of practice in employment. They do not make the classbound distinction between English further education for the trades and higher education for the professions. Indeed, Altbach is founding director of the Center for International Higher Education at an independent Jesuit university – Boston College (*sic*).

Even in England, where Alison Wolf has said FE is being 'decanted' into mass HE to create mass tertiary education, antique divisions have eroded

under the impact of new technology to reflect what is surely the essence of the so-called 'knowledge economy': that employees enabled by new information and communications technology increasingly work across the previous divisions of labour and knowledge.

Still, as Altbach says of India, 'Mass higher education plays as much a political and social role as it does an educational one' (p215) and this surely happens everywhere. In the USA, for instance, the social role of a college degree is to give hope of achieving the American dream by attaining at least semi-professional secure employment. Failure to gain a degree is confirmation of precarious status.

As a result, it appears two things are happening simultaneously: at one end the consolidation of an elite and at the other massification with heightened differentiation in between. Overall, the result is: 'The average quality of students entering postsecondary education declines at the same time that competition for places in the top universities increases' (p52). This is 'The Logic of Mass Higher Education' Chapter 3 spells out.

Precarity

This logic partly accounts for the majority female participation in mass tertiary HE worldwide, UK FE students for some time now being predominantly female. Not that completion of tertiary education guarantees employment security over precarity since formerly secure professions are constantly

being automated, deskilled, outsourced and routinised to multi-skilled, flexible working.

This is the concern of father and son Oxford dons, Richard and Daniel Susskind. The former has previously published on the impact of new technology upon legal practice and training, where case law has long been digitised. The latter worked until 2010 in the Prime Ministerial Strategy Unit whose commitment to relentless modernisation both share.

As they conclude: 'in the end, the traditional professions will be dismantled, leaving most (but not all) professionals to be replaced by less expert people and high performing systems . . . new roles will arise but . . . these too, in due course, may be taken on by machines' (p303). This 'liberation of expertise' in a 'post-professional society' empowers consumers and increases value. Driven by technology, it is also inevitable, so that – despite their disparagement of 'Marxist determinism' – the Susskinds are themselves technological determinists.

Consequently, 'Before too long, we will need to revisit our ideas about full-time employment, the purpose of work, and the balance between work and leisure' (p295). This joins those who see capitalism dissolving itself by somehow transcending human labour, perhaps by transhumanly integrating people with machines. However, the Susskinds do not go so far since they accept the fundamental capitalist division between employers and employees, the latter including all professionals save those who are self-employed. They do not therefore make Mike Cooley's distinction in his recently republished *Architect or Bee?* (reviewed in *PSE* 83), between machines to which workers are subject and tools that they could use in 'human-centred technology' for 'socially useful production'.

Erosion

Instead of a critique therefore, Susskind and Susskind present a survey of the changes taking place across health, education, law, journalism, accountancy and the new profession of management consulting as well as the old one of divinity. They explain the erosion of what they call 'The Grand Bargain' in a print-based society between the professional gate-keepers of privileged knowledge distributing their expertise to clients who lack it. This solution to the uneven distribution of knowledge is breaking down under the impact of 'a technology-based Internet society'. The book thus provides many examples of the stages of disintermediation and digitisation professions and

crafts go through as new technology is applied to replicate and improve professional diagnoses and judgements. This is achieved not by Artificial Intelligence but by machines churning through vast quantities of accumulated data.

The implications for the 200 million students and their more than six million teachers worldwide are immense. The Susskinds anticipate that 'people will tend to be trained on a task-basis rather than for undertaking jobs' (p263). This turns more or less academic vocational preparation into pre-vocational training of the type that Altbach assumes to have been completed in secondary schools where the Susskinds favour 'personalised intelligent tutoring' for more effective cramming, while endorsing 'the one-to-one tutorial system that has worked so effectively at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge' (p56).

Change

This would seem an instance of the authors' repeated trope that the professional leaders they consulted all acknowledged the need for change, save in their own profession. But they have a point that this type of apprentice mentoring develops genuine vocations often closely related to employment, including the academic vocation itself. This is hardly possible in the increasingly managed 'student experience' of mass tertiary education detailed worldwide by Altbach.

The English government aims to reduce student numbers by raising fees whilst encouraging differentiation through market competition. Instead, as technological change reduces the need for specialised vocational preparation but enables a variety of occupations to be undertaken throughout an individual's working life, the on-line information of a creative commons might be supplemented as required by the knowledge of experts coordinated across a lifelong National Education Service. This alternative to free market mayhem would require some planning however!