

The unbundling of higher education: a brave new world?

Tristan McCowan (University College London)

Clark Kerr's landmark 1963 book, *The Uses of the University*, told the story of the emergence of what he termed the 'multiversity', an extraordinarily complex conglomeration of faculties of diverse disciplinary areas, research centres, administrative blocks, spin-off businesses, student residences, hospitals and a range of other services for the public. The multiversity marked the culmination of centuries of development of the university in expanding its curricular offering, its range of functions, and service role in relation to society. The coexistence of these different activities was seen to bring not only efficiencies and convenience, but added value through their mutual nurturing and cross-fertilisation: teaching and research were viewed as mutually enriching, students as benefiting from the diversity of opportunities available, and the university as enhancing its beneficial impact on society as a whole through the immediate application of research and scholarship.

Yet in the early stages of the 21st century we are faced with a contrary tendency – that of *unbundling*. The functions of the university are once again being separated out: services are increasingly outsourced to external companies, teaching-only institutions are on the rise, particularly in the for-profit sector, along with distance education and massive open online courses (MOOCs), and the work of academics is being portioned out between a range of specialist 'para-academics', as the tenured research professor becomes increasingly rare (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015; Macfarlane 2011; Robertson & Komljenovic 2016). For some (see Thiel Fellowships¹) the university itself is obsolete, and needs to be replaced with forms of learning more suited to the need for innovation and adaptability of contemporary capitalism.

Yet to what extent do these signs of unbundling constitute a real threat to the integrity of the university? And if they do, should we be worried about it?

What is unbundling in higher education?

The notion of unbundling comes from the world of business: it describes the process through which products that were previously sold as bundles or packages are distributed separately. The driver of this change is usually that of bringing new consumers into the market, through more competitively priced products, given that buyers will be relieved from the need to pay for items they do not desire. In this way, the airline industry has been transformed by the unbundling of the total flight experience, with consumers now able to minimise their costs by doing away with meals, luggage allowance, choice of seat and so forth.

In higher education, unbundling has manifested itself in a range of ways. It has emerged as a counterpoint to the elite research university, whose spiralling costs have made it an easy target for reformers, particularly in the USA. It is argued that this form of institution is

¹ <http://thielfellowship.org/>

superfluous to the needs of most students, and by packaging the university as a single experience, we are unfairly tying consumers into products they neither want nor need. In response, new institutions have emerged (primarily in the for-profit sector) providing a 'no-frills' higher education experience with only the essentials of instruction and assessment. This move has allowed new providers to enter the market and have a chance of turning a profit, and – according to the proponents at least – opened the door to new forms of students.

The arguments for unbundling, therefore, are largely financial, but there is also a pedagogical position put forward. Conventional university courses are old-fashioned and restrictive, say the critics, and unbundled forms of higher education allow for greater learner autonomy, in choosing what to learn and when to learn. Content is *personalised*, and based not around 'seat time', but the learning outcomes themselves. It can also involve *gamification*, through which techniques from videogames are incorporated to make learning more engaging (Craig 2015). Ultimately, these unbundled forms of higher learning are argued to be better adapted to the contemporary economy and to enhance learners' employability.

There are milder and more radical forms of unbundling. In most institutions there are some examples, such as the emergence of specialist staff dealing with student support, online course development, careers advice, research management, not to mention staff on precarious teaching-only contracts. However, there are some much more extreme manifestations of unbundling that cut to the core of the institution. Ryan Craig (2015), co-founder of University Ventures investment fund, argues that the days of the degree course are numbered, and that employers would be served better by a competency management platform on which all candidates would register their skill sets, certified by 'badges'. Universities would then no longer be necessary as students could develop their learning and acquire the certificates as and when they needed through a range of providers. MOOCs are central to this revolution-in-waiting, given their accessibility and flexibility in terms of timing and accreditation (Laurillard & Kennedy 2017).

There are also trends that can be observed in terms of the disaggregation of teaching and research in institutions, with much of the huge demand for higher education places around the world being absorbed by teaching-only institutions. It is important to note here that some countries have always maintained independent research centres, and that in all countries much scholarship before the 20th century did in fact take place outside of the universities. Nevertheless, we can point to an ongoing trend of dislocation of instruction from the processes of enquiry that generate new understanding and knowledge.

A brave new world for higher education?

Unbundling is a contested issue from both empirical and normative perspectives (McCowan 2017). To start with, it is not clear to what extent higher education systems and institutions globally are in fact moving in this direction. Can we observe movements towards unbundling in the day-to-day of our academic work and institutions? How do these dynamics differ between institution types, countries and regions? Fine-grained research in higher education institutions in multiple contexts is essential to address these questions.

Gehrke & Kezar (2015) assert that in relation to academic staff roles historically we can see something of a circular motion, with movements towards and away from unbundling. It may be that the current trends may be reversed at a future point in time. Or alternatively, there may be different processes for different kinds of institutions or contexts. Marginson (2016), for example, has argued that there are contrary forces that are still bolstering the integrity of the research university, particularly for elite institutions. Are we moving into a two-tiered system, with integral research universities for the privileged, and unbundled higher education for the poor?

The second set of questions are the normative ones about whether or not we should value or fear the changes that unbundling will bring. As seen above, the situation is made more complicated by the fact that it is more than simply a case for-profit companies maximising their financial opportunities: these changes are presented in terms of democratisation of access and empowerment of learners. But while personalisation appears to give greater control and freedom for students, we can also see the unbundling of higher education as involving ever decreasing engagement between learners and teachers, and between learners and other learners – thus impeding the possibilities of transformatory learning along the lines of Freirean *conscientisation* (Freire 1976) or Illich's (1973) *conviviality*. There is an even more basic question about whether as learners we are always the best judge of what to learn, when, and in what sequence, and whether there is a place for lecturer experience and specialisation in guiding learners' trajectories.

There are also implications for inequalities of access. On the one hand, unbundling represents an opening up of the higher education system, previously protected by the high walls of tuition fees and competitive entrance exams. On the other hand, it presents the spectre of the poor being confined to the no-frills experiences, while the privileged continue to frequent the elite institutions: as exemplified by Coventry University's new two tier system, through which students can pay a lower fee for a 'CU Coventry' degree, with a whittled-down pedagogical experience and less access to facilities (Vasagar, 2011). The premium, regular and economy versions of supermarket branded items allow all consumers to buy food, but clearly not of the same quality.

There is also the question of the integrity of the university in bringing together teaching, research and community engagement. The key question to consider here is whether the whole of the university is indeed greater than the sum of the parts – whether there is any real value in integration, or whether all of the functions would be delivered just as well in isolation from one another. If unbundling does signal the end of the university, does that really matter, or will higher learning and scholarship continue on in other forms? These questions are particularly crucial since the new forms of unbundled higher education are undoubtedly more affordable, thereby potentially opening the door to new cohorts of students who have previously been excluded. The stakes, therefore, are high in closing or opening the door on unbundling. Close-up research – and the dialogue generated through the juxtaposition of studies in different regions and institutional types – is critical in enhancing our understanding of this contemporary trend, and imagining new possibilities of action in response to the challenges posed.

References

- Craig, R. (2015). *College disrupted: The great unbundling of higher education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freire, P. (1976) *Education, the Practice of Freedom*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.
- Gehrke, S. & Kezar, A. (2015). Unbundling the faculty role in higher education: Utilizing historical, theoretical, and empirical frameworks to inform future research. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 93–150). Berlin: Springer International Publishing.
- Illich, I. (1973). *Tools for conviviality*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Kerr, C. (1963). *The uses of the university*. New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.
- Laurillard, D. and Kennedy, E. (2017) The potential of MOOCs for learning at scale in the Global South. Centre for Global Higher Education Working paper no. 31. Available at: <http://www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/publications/wp31.pdf>
- Macfarlane, B. (2011). The morphing of academic practice: Unbundling and the rise of the paraacademic. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65, 59–73.
- Marginson, S. (2016). *What holds the conglomerate university together?* Paper presented at the Education, Practice and Society Seminar, November, UCL Institute of Education, London.
- McCowan, T. (2017) Higher education, unbundling and the end of the university as we know it. *Oxford Review of Education*, 43 (6), 733-748.
- Robertson, S. L., & Komljenovic, J. (2016b). Unbundling the university and making higher education markets. In A. Verger, C. Lubienski, & G. Steiner-Kamsi (Eds.), *World yearbook in education* (Global edu). London: Routledge.