Innovating In An
Age Of Uncertainty

Sir John Daniel

CIQG Publication Series

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(Editor's note: Elements of this paper were originally presented as the closing keynote lecture at the 2018 conference of the Groningen Declaration Network held at the University of Paris on 20 March, 2018)

Introduction

Faster and more wide-ranging innovation is often urged as the key to solving the various challenges that currently face humankind, from climate change to income inequality. This article looks at a complex example of innovation, the portability of qualifications proposed in Groningen Declaration, and reviews some of the political and social obstacles that might slow down or prevent the implementation of this idea.

We first explain the Groningen Declaration in simple terms and then examine various issues that stakeholders, such as students, universities, employers and governments, would want it to address. Then we shall gather these various issues into three broad categories: privacy, trust and student mobility – and argue that each of them poses special problems at the current time.

Our aim is not to discourage innovation, but to remind those pushing new ideas that the obstacles to their adoption may often seem to have little direct relation to the idea itself.

What is the *Groningen Declaration*?

The *Groningen Declaration on Student Data Depositories Worldwide*, to use its full name, was signed in the Dutch city of Groningen in April 2012 by invited participants from central student data administration systems as well as from some non-profit membership associations of registrars and international student officers.

The motivation for this development was the growing awareness, in institutions, governments and among the general public, of the need to establish more complete mechanisms for the delivery of digital student data. The *Declaration* hypothesised that "digital student data portability and digital student data depositories are becoming increasingly concrete and relevant realities, and in the years to come, they will contribute decisively to the free movement of students and skilled workers on global scale."[1]

The *Declaration* noted that in order to unleash the full potential of digital student data depositories its promoters would need to address various personal and social issues, including privacy rights, ownership of data, identification, access and forwarding/sharing of data, as well as the comparability of systems and data.

Many of the challenges that must be solved for goals of the *Groningen Declaration* to be achieved are technical. For example, some consider that blockchain technology could provide the security necessary to make data tamper-proof.[2] We shall not be concerned here with such technical aspects but will, instead, focus on the personal and social issues just noted. For simplicity, we shall group them into three: privacy, trust and student mobility.

The backdrop to our comments is that each of these issues is currently sensitive. The giant software companies are grappling with a massive loss of public confidence in their protection of users' privacy. Most governments are attempting – seemingly with little success – to counter a general loss of trust in public (and private) institutions. Finally, unpredictable changes to patterns of student mobility across the globe create an unusually tricky environment for universities trying to manage their foreign enrolments.

Implicit in the idea that innovation holds the key to solving contemporary problems is our general belief in progress. Higher education, in particular, is grounded in a belief in progress.

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[1] Groningen Declaration, (2012) http://new.groningendeclaration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/groningendeclaration_final_final-1.pdf. Accessed 2018-05-08

[2] Blockchain Technology in Education: How the latter can be disrupted (2018). https://elearningindustry.com/blockchain-technology-in-education-latter-can-disrupted. Accessed 2018-05-08

Change is welcome because, on the whole, it is for the better. The students in our universities believe that they will operate from a higher base of knowledge and skills than we did, whether it is in dentistry, ecology, history or philosophy. They expect that their more advanced knowledge and skills will create a better world.

But are we in higher education so wedded to our belief in steady progress that we have not noticed the erosion of that assumption among large parts of the public? Much of today's political turbulence reflects a loss of belief in progress.

Whether calling them "the good old days" or not, much contemporary electioneering harks back to a time when things were better, although candidates are reluctant to specify exactly when those good old days were. That's wise, because surveys show that for most people the world was at its best when they themselves were in their early twenties, so the good old days are a moveable feast. Many of the voters responsible for the Brexit and Trump victories in 2016 were nostalgic for life as it was somewhere between the early 1960s and late 1970s.

Nostalgia is a depressive state linked to a pining for a past time or place. Cathal Kelly observes that it has resurfaced on a vast scale.[3] "Across the developed world people and movements are reaching back to an often-illusory past trying to chart the future through a form of retreat. From Trump to Brexit and beyond, we've collectively entered a funhouse time machine trudging backward."

How can we reverse this trend and spread the belief that innovation is benign, with progress and innovation intimately linked? What are the obstacles to overcome?

Privacy

I start with privacy. Not long ago social media were the darlings of the technology industry and their merits were vaunted almost universally. Some did not hesitate to herald a brave new era of human equality in the creation and dissemination of useful information. Organisations of all types, from banks to universities, fell over themselves to add social media strategies to their communications and public relations portfolios. Today, a soberer assessment is appropriate.
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[3]Kelly, Cathal (2016) The New Age of Nostalgia, The Globe and Mail, December 23. http://www.theglobeand-mail.com/news/world/us-politics/the-new-age-of-nostalgia/article33421337/. Accessed 2017-03-16

The realisation that our new information technology (IT) idol has feet of clay has taken many forms. As *The Economist* newspaper recently commented: "The failings of America's self-regulatory approach are becoming clearer by the week. Large parts of the online economy are fuelled by data that consumers spray around without thought. Companies' arcane privacy policies obfuscate what they do with their users' information, which often amounts to pretty much anything they please."[4]

An editorial published earlier this year in *The Globe & Mail* newspaper ago lifted the veil on some of the obfuscation and described starkly the reality that we have drifted into. It was titled "Every click you make."[5]

"Nobody reads the fine print… so here, as a public service in 2018, is a non-exhaustive compendium of what you agree to when you accept the terms of service of Facebook, Google, Amazon or virtually any other internet or social networking company.

"Depending on the company, you're giving permission to it track your physical movements, your appointments and your meetings. If it's a social-media app. you're providing it with list of your friends and relatives – and a good deal more, such as a record of your internet searches. You may well have ceded control of your microphone or camera.

"Accepting an app's request to access your phone contacts can also provide it with unfettered access to your text messages and the time, duration, location and number for every incoming and outgoing call.

"Oh, and you're definitely allowing Facebook, LinkedIn and hundreds of others to sell aspects of this information. If they are swallowed by a bigger company that data will in all likelihood, transfer to the buyer. Often you accept that it could get hacked, stolen or misused along the way.

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[4]The Economist (2018) America should borrow from Europe's data-privacy law (April 5). https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21739961-gdprs-premise-consumers-should-be-charge-their-own-personal-data-right Accessed 2018-05-08

[5]Globe & Mail (2018) Internet users need to understand what they're signing up for. 29 March). https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-globe-editorial-internet-users-need-to-understand-what-theyre/. Accessed 2018-05-08

"The central problem is default settings: to maintain privacy one must opt in. This is exactly backwards, and it is not innocent. Companies shift responsibility to users while reserving the power to limit their privacy choices. It is the industry standard and central to many business models.

"Would we blithely accept this mixture of intrusion and lack of control if government were demanding it? Not a chance!

"The simplest summary of the modern terms of service agreement is contained in a 1983 soft-rock classic by *The Police* that is often mistaken for a love song – although it's about stalking:
Every breath you take,
Every move you make,
Every bond you break,
Every step you take,
I'll be watching you.

"Click here if you agree," the editorial concludes.

What to do? We need new rules for the Internet, but can we do this without "defriending" the social media? The titans of the technology industry are the most valuable companies on earth, yet they are still coddled by tax laws as if they were an emerging industry. "It is time for Silicon Valley to pay unto Caesar, not least so that we plebeians can use the tax revenue to fix the things they keep breaking, such as journalism."

To whom should we look for action? With the United States (U.S.) mired in the politics of the current administration, we cannot expect much from there. The European Union (EU) is slow and bureaucratic, but its General Data Protection Regulation sets a high standard. Grappling with this regulation is the first time that many universities have had to get serious about international data privacy, which is a promising start.

But do people really care? I expect that readers of this article do care about privacy. But I also suspect that most people are happy to give away personal data that they don't really understand in exchange for daily photos of their grandchildren or some sleazy fake news stories. As I quoted *The Economist* earlier: "large parts of the online economy are fuelled by data that consumers spray around without thought."

Can we really expect ordinary people to take to the barricades in the defence of their privacy? They assume that the elites have already conned them into abandoning it.

Trust

I move now to trust – and here we have a steep hill to climb.

In his powerful book, Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order, Francis Fukuyama argued persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly to the trust that their people have in each other and in their institutions.[6] Some countries flourished because strangers learned to trust one another when signing contracts, allowing them to do deals outside the circles of family, tribal or in-group kinship relied upon in low-trust societies. Contrast Sweden and Sicily or Norway and Nigeria.

The vicious campaigns to voters in the United Kingdom (UK), the U.S. and other countries in 2016 were deeply corrosive of trust, although we should not delude ourselves that this loss of trust began with Silvio Berlusconi, Viktor Orban, Donald Trump or Theresa May. Year-on-year surveys by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) show that public trust in government in the US has been declining gradually for half-a-century. Over 50 years the trust that Americans have in government has declined from 80 percent to 20 percent.

Trust in government is one of many measures that the Economist Intelligence Unit conflates to produce its annual democracy index.[7] In 2016 – even before Trump's election – the U.S., for the first time, no longer ranked among the world's 19 "full democracies," but had been demoted to "flawed democracy." Sadly, restoring trust is much harder than undermining it.

The discounting of expert knowledge, the portrayal of one elite by another as evil and the erosion of trust in institutions are all damaging to societies in general and to universities in particular. How do we start to repair the damage?

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[6] Fukuyama, Francis (1995) Trust and the Reconstitution of the Social Order, Simon & Schuster, New York.

[7] The Economist Intelligence Unit (2016) Democracy Index 2016: Revenge of the "deplorables". http://pages .eiu.com/rs/783-XMC-194/images/Democracy_Index_2016.pdf. Accessed 2017-03-16

Closely related to trust is respect for truth. Each year the Oxford dictionaries choose a "word of the year." For 2016 that word was "post-truth." They defined post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Their example is the sentence: "In this era of post-truth politics, it is easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire."

As the rector of the University of Oslo, Ole Petter Ottersen, puts it, "the lack of confidence in academia is a great challenge.[8] What role can a truth-seeking university play in an era characterised as 'post-truth'?" He continues: "Faced with the prospect of a post-factual society, universities have to re-establish a respect for objective truth and powerful arguments – through our educational programmes and through our public outreach. We have to create many more arenas for debate – arenas that are open and inclusive so as to give a voice to those who feel left behind too. Universities should be trust building as well as truth seeking." He concludes: "In our age of turbulence these two words – trust and truth – are inextricably intertwined."

Populism is the political expression of these trends away from truth and trust. It combines nostalgia for the past, post-truth rhetoric, lack of trust in experts and institutions, a desire to divide and, above all, hostility to whatever can be labelled elite, usually by an accuser from another elite.

There are two antidotes to this.

First, as an earlier writer put it, "nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory." One task of higher education is to be a good memory for humanity.

Second, all graduates should leave college - if not high school - with a grasp of the broad sweep of human development. A recent account by the Swedish historian Johan Norberg gives a concise summary.[9]

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[8] Ottersen, Ole Petter (2016) How should universities confront a post-truth world? University World News, December 9. http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=2016120519520037. Accessed 2017-03-16

[9] Norberg, Johan (2016) Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future, One World Publications, London.

His fact-filled book is a powerful antidote to our tendency to generalise from the He documents the enormous progress achieved, not just over previous centuries but also over the recent decades since the badly remembered "good old days." latest news report about a famine, a war or the health challenges of modern life and think how awful things are now.

His introduction is titled: "The Good Old Days are Now." Norberg does not pretend that every step we take is a step forward, but he documents, worldwide, long-term trends for the better in vital areas of life. These trends are persistent and, according to him, will continue despite occasional setbacks or bad choices.

Student mobility

I turn, finally to the third area of focus of the *Groningen Declaration* – student mobility. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon. In the 7th century Nalanda University in India, which was already over a thousand years old, had 10,000 students, many of them visiting Buddhists from China.

A millennium later Erasmus of Rotterdam became the symbol of learner mobility in Europe and has given his name to the world's largest international student exchange programme. So, the question today is not whether learner mobility is a good thing, but whether the current times challenge the gains achieved over many years.

In early 2018, the electronic weekly *University World News* carried readable accounts by the protagonists on each side of the argument. Where you stand on this issue depends on whether you believe that governments have a determining influence on learner mobility or whether it depends essentially on the whims of individual students.

Leading for those who call this an age of challenge for learner mobility are Phil Altbach and Hans de Wit, who are from the US and the Netherlands respectively. They do not mince their words.

"The global landscape for higher education internationalisation is changing dramatically. What one might call the 'era of higher education internationalisation over the past 25 years (1990-2015) that has characterised university thinking and action might be finished, or at least on life support. The unlimited growth of internationalisation of all kinds, including massive global student mobility, the expansion of

branch campuses, franchised and joint degrees, the use of English as a language for teaching and research worldwide and many other elements – appears to have come to a rather abrupt end, especially in Europe and North America."[10]

These authors admit that that ethos and thinking in most universities is still avowedly international and that schemes like the Erasmus exchanges continue to thrive. But they also note worrying signs. The upheavals of 2016, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, by increasing the problems of obtaining visas and creating an unwelcoming atmosphere for foreign students, threaten to decrease their numbers. And the signs are not only in the UK and the U.S. There are active debates in the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Italy about the numbers of foreign students and about the trend to offer more programmes in English to accommodate them.

In another article the same authors report on the dramatic changes taking place in China, which are not, in their view, attracting sufficient attention in the rest of the world, despite China's huge role as both as a sender and receiver of students.[11] Key aspects of the changes, following the removal of term limits for Xi Jinping and a large increase in his powers, are tightening of the Internet and greater control of the Web, a larger role for the Communist Party in university governance, and attacks on attempts to introduce U.S.-style liberal education.

Other countries have accordingly become more suspicious of China's influence in their jurisdictions, notably the role of the 480 Confucius Institutes worldwide, attempts to bias the work of Australian scholars on China, and the browbeating of a UK publisher to remove material from its website (since restored). In sum, the Chinese authorities are increasingly trying to interfere overseas, with growing pushback by Western academics and institutions.

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[10]Altbach, P. & H. De Wit (2018) The challenge to higher education internationalisation (23 February). http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20180220091648602 Accessed 2018-05-08

[11]Altbach, P & H. De Wit (2018) The closing of China will affect universities worldwide (9 March) http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20180308085109268 Accessed 2018-05-08

The contrary case – for continued brisk growth in learner mobility – is made by Alex Usher from Canada (a country that is seeing double-digit annual increases in foreign enrolments thanks to the problems in the UK and the U.S.).[12]

Fees are a key element in the public perception of learner mobility. However, since governments within the European Union cannot charge differential fees for students from other EU countries it is natural that countries which are net importers of EU students face the perception that they are in competition with domestic students. Usher observes that the ten countries with the largest numbers of international students are mostly trying hard to increase their numbers and "by and large are succeeding in doing so." He concludes that institutions in the UK and the U.S. desperately want to see more international students, but their efforts are being damaged by "governments which are desperately unpopular that may well be replaced in the very near future."

Conclusion

We have taken the Groningen Declaration on Student Data Repositories Worldwide as an example of a potentially important innovation in global higher education. Might the present climate of public suspicion of IT systems, loss of trust in institutions of all types and growing hostility to international student mobility, make such an innovation suspect and stall its implementation?

Much will depend on the network of organisations and volunteers that is growing around the Groningen Declaration. Its institutions and members are well aware that the security of portable student data is paramount. Stories about the hacking of blockchain systems – if that is one of the technologies used – do not help!

In introducing new systems there is sometimes a choice between a "big bang" approach where everything switches over at once and a more gradual (and usually more expensive) transition. This would appear to be a case for gradualism. So far, students have generally adapted well to consulting their student records on online systems. Whether, 20 years hence, graduates will be pleased to hold all their educational records themselves in portable formats will depend on the quality of the implementation of the data repositories and the evolution of public attitudes to privacy, trust and student mobility.

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[12]Usher, A. (2018) The case for optimism on internationalisation of HE. (30 March). http://www.university-worldnews.com/article.php?story=20180328140850148. Accessed 2018-05-08

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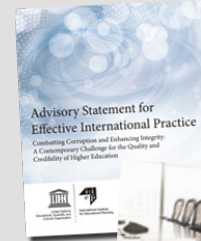
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