

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Reimagining Higher Education: The Necessity for Transformational Change

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**Article history:**

Received: 06/25/2024

Revised: 07/17/2024

Accepted: 08/10/2024

**keywords:**

*Transformational change*

*Interdisciplinary education*

*Lifelong learning*

*Globalization*

*Generic Skills*

### Abstract

The concept of transformational change in higher education has become increasingly significant in my reflections, especially in the context of ever-evolving global economies, rapid technological advancements, and shifting societal expectations. I believe that transformational change goes beyond incremental improvements; it requires deep, systemic shifts that reimagine and restructure Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to meet the complex challenges of today's world. This essay explores the key dimensions that I consider essential to this transformation, including interdisciplinary education, the integration of digital technologies, and the promotion of lifelong learning. It also examines the underlying forces driving this change, such as globalization and the demand for generic skills, which have fundamentally altered the landscape of higher education. Finally, I offer some strategies to facilitate this transformation, emphasizing the importance of flexible governance, faculty development, and student empowerment. I argue that by embracing these changes, HEIs can better prepare students for a dynamic and interconnected future.



## Introduction

In recent years, I have observed significant global trends reshaping higher education, fundamentally altering how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operate and how students learn. One of the most impactful trends, from my perspective, is the increasing digitalization of education. The rise of online learning platforms, artificial intelligence tools, and digital resources has drastically shifted how knowledge is delivered. No longer confined to the physical classroom, students now engage in flexible, technology-driven environments. My experiences in countries like Israel and China have highlighted how rapidly universities are adopting these technologies.

For example, in China, the integration of AI in classrooms and online platforms has enabled personalized learning on a massive scale. Additionally, I observed a deep culture of self-regulated learning and self-discipline among undergraduate students in this country. Many of these students demonstrate a strong ability to manage their own study schedules and adapt to new learning tools without constant supervision. How can other regions, such as Latin America, match this pace of technological adoption and foster similar levels of self-discipline, while maintaining their unique educational values? I see this shift as a critical moment for universities to redefine their roles and approaches to education delivery.

Another equally important trend that I've witnessed is the growing demand for interdisciplinary education. The traditional, discipline-specific models are becoming obsolete as global challenges like climate change and social inequality demand solutions that span multiple fields of expertise. From my standpoint, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial for equipping students with the diverse skills, including generic competencies, they need to address real-world issues, thus enriching the educational experience and enhancing their problem-solving abilities. My time working with universities in Latin America has underscored the importance of this shift.

In my experience, working in countries like Colombia and Mexico, I have seen a promising shift as HEIs begin to dismantle the academic silos that have long limited their potential. These silos often create barriers not only for the institutions themselves but also for their faculty, staff, and—most critically—students, along with the wider community they aim to serve (Mizuta, 2022). I believe that breaking down these divisions is essential, as it opens up new pathways for cross-disciplinary research, enabling fresh approaches in critical areas such as the development of generic skills, sustainability, and social innovation. Witnessing this change firsthand has reinforced my belief that embracing a more collaborative, interdisciplinary mindset can greatly enrich both the educational experience and the real-world impact of research. But are these efforts enough to meet the complexity of today's challenges? How can HEIs ensure that such interdisciplinary initiatives translate into real-world impact rather than remain as isolated academic projects?

Globalization, in my view, has also played a transformative role in reshaping higher education. The increasing interconnectedness of universities worldwide has intensified cross-border student mobility, faculty exchanges, and research collaborations. During my time in Israel, I noticed how international partnerships significantly enriched the research landscape, allowing for diverse perspectives and innovative approaches. Similarly, in China, collaborations with Western universities have enhanced research capabilities and broadened the academic dialogue. However, my experiences in Latin America reveal a more nuanced reality - while globalization offers opportunities for collaboration, it often comes with the challenge of aligning with global standards without losing sight of local relevance. Can Latin American universities leverage their unique cultural and regional insights while integrating into a global academic network? I see this trend as both an opportunity and a challenge, one that requires a delicate balance between adopting global best practices and preserving the local context that enriches the educational experience.

Finally, I recognize the growing emphasis on lifelong learning. The rapid pace of technological advancement and job market shifts has made it clear to me that education can no longer be seen as a one-time event confined to one's youth. Rather, I believe that universities must now cater to learners at all stages of life, offering short-term courses, online certifications, and flexible pathways for continuous skills development. During my visits to universities across different regions, including Latin America, I have seen a clear desire among adult learners to re-skill and adapt to new technologies. In Israel, the culture of lifelong learning is deeply ingrained, with many professionals returning to universities to gain expertise in emerging fields like cybersecurity. How can other regions adopt this culture of continuous learning to remain competitive in a globalized market? Based on these global trends, I argue that transformational change in higher education is not just necessary, but critical to restructuring educational models, governance, and learning and teaching practices to meet 21st-century challenges. The question is not whether change is needed, but how HEIs can embrace this change effectively to serve a more dynamic and interconnected world.

#### *Transformational change in higher education*

Transformational change involves profound, systemic shifts that fundamentally alter how HEIs function. This concept has gained traction as educators and institutions strive to meet the evolving demands of students, industries, and global markets, adapting to rapid technological advancements and shifting societal expectations. According to Kotter (2007), transformational change is distinguished by its depth and long-term impact, transcending minor adjustments to radically reshape organizational operations and stakeholder interactions. It is a comprehensive process that reimagines educational models, governance structures, and the roles of educators, with the aim of fostering continuous learning, innovation, and adaptability. Such change requires strong leadership, a clear vision, and collaborative efforts across all levels of the institution to ensure that these new practices take root and thrive.

I fully align with Kotter's perspective that transformational change in higher education requires deep, meaningful modifications that lead to significant improvements in educational quality, pedagogical innovation, and the relevance of academic programs. Kotter stresses that true transformation must extend beyond incremental changes, reshaping the foundational ways in which institutions operate. This resonates deeply with my own observations, as I have witnessed that simply updating curricula or adding new courses without altering the fundamental approach to teaching does not lead to genuine innovation. Transformation, as understood by both Kotter and myself, demands a rethinking of institutional culture, governance, and pedagogy.

In this context, I believe that the leadership style adopted to drive transformational change is pivotal. Effective leaders in higher education must not only cultivate a sense of urgency but also articulate a clear and compelling vision that motivates faculty and staff to embrace the change process actively. Leadership should align the institution's stakeholders, fostering a shared commitment to the change effort. Without leadership that prioritizes collaboration and innovation, attempts at transformational change risk being shallow and ineffective. In my experience, many educators remain attached to traditional methods like lectures, even when these methods may no longer serve the needs of today's students. True transformation requires leaders who are willing to challenge the status quo and encourage faculty to explore new teaching paradigms.

For an organization to thrive, it is critical that leaders select and implement a leadership style that maximizes productivity and engagement. The right leadership style not only creates opportunities within the organization but also involves employees in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership (Torlak et al., 2021). Studies have shown that transformational and democratic leadership are particularly effective in driving success and improving organizational performance (Budur, 2020; Budur & Potura, 2021). However, without leadership that actively promotes collaboration, innovation, and a readiness to move beyond traditional norms, transformational efforts can easily become superficial and fail to produce lasting impact. I believe that genuine change lies in empowering both educators and students to adopt new roles in the learning process, where creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability are the cornerstones of a modern education.

Brandt et al. (2019) further emphasize the depth of transformational change, describing it as a radical process that influences the entire organization. Their perspective highlights that this change extends beyond surface-level adjustments, affecting core aspects such as institutional culture, operational practices, and the foundational beliefs that shape an institution's educational approach. From my perspective, this captures the kind of deep transformation that many universities are currently experiencing. Transformational change is not simply about updating curricula or incorporating new technologies; it involves fundamentally rethinking how knowledge is created, disseminated, and applied. For instance, transitioning from traditional lecture-based teaching to a

more student-centered, technology-enhanced model represents a shift in both pedagogy and institutional identity. How can universities navigate such profound shifts while maintaining their academic rigor and foundational values? I believe that this question lies at the heart of the challenge of enacting transformational change.

The insights of Kotter (2007) and Brandt et al. (2019) underscore the importance of adopting a strategic and comprehensive approach to change. While Kotter's emphasis on creating urgency and a shared vision is crucial for building momentum, Brandt et al.'s focus on the deep cultural shifts required ensures that change is truly transformative. I believe that combining these perspectives allows HEIs to cultivate environments that are both adaptive and committed to excellence—spaces where innovation thrives and new ideas are welcomed. This blend of strategic vision and cultural transformation is what enables institutions to navigate the complexities of the 21st-century educational landscape effectively.

For more than a decade, I have used the term “transformational change” to describe the kind of deep structural shifts needed in teaching practices to cultivate more empowered, self-directed learners. Over the years, I have observed a growing awareness of the need for such change, especially as technological advancements and societal expectations demand more of educational institutions. However, I have also noticed that despite curricular updates and reforms at the meso-curriculum level, many of my colleagues remain anchored to traditional lecture-based approaches at the micro-curriculum level, which fail to engage students in the dynamic, interactive ways that transformational change promises.

In my view, achieving transformational change requires a shift in mindset across all levels of an institution, particularly among leadership and faculty. It is not enough to update curricula; there must be a holistic effort to transform the entire learning ecosystem. This means transitioning away from teacher-centered models toward student-centered approaches that prioritize active learning, critical thinking, and practical problem-solving. Unfortunately, many educators still see change as optional or incremental, which limits the potential for deeper transformation. The real challenge, in my experience, is overcoming the inertia that keeps faculty members within their comfort zones. Transformational change is inherently disruptive—it challenges established routines and requires educators to redefine their roles. Without a sense of urgency and strong transformational leadership, such efforts cannot succeed. For higher education to truly evolve, we must look beyond surface-level reforms and commit to reimagining what it means to educate in the 21st century. This requires institutional dedication, faculty development, and the courage to embrace innovative teaching methodologies that empower both students and educators.

### *Curriculum reform*

A key dimension of transformational change is rethinking the curriculum to make it more relevant to the demands of the 21st century. But what does it truly mean to reshape a curriculum in this era of rapid change? In my view, it involves moving away from rigid, discipline-specific programs toward more interdisciplinary approaches that equip students to address complex, real-world challenges. As Brown (2017) highlights, many HEIs continue to operate in silos, where departments work independently, interact minimally, and often struggle with conflicting definitions of foundational terms. This fragmented approach raises a critical question: is it truly meeting the diverse needs of today's learners? I believe that a more integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum is essential, particularly as students increasingly engage with learning across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. This integration not only enriches their educational experiences but also prepares them to think beyond the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines.

How can universities adapt to the reality that learning happens beyond traditional classrooms—through online platforms, community engagement, and even social media? I think that adopting an interdisciplinary approach can bridge the gap between what is taught within HEIs and the skills students acquire outside of them. This shift is crucial, as today's global challenges, such as climate change and technological disruption, require solutions that draw from multiple fields of knowledge. Curriculum reform should also integrate digital literacy, global competencies, and sustainability as essential elements. How can universities ensure that students are not just specialists in a single discipline but well-rounded thinkers? By embedding these areas into the curriculum, we can better prepare students for the dynamic, interconnected world they will face upon graduation.

### *Faculty Development and Pedagogical Innovation*

Transformational change cannot occur without faculty being equipped to navigate and lead these changes. But how can we motivate educators to adopt new teaching methodologies when traditional methods feel safer? For me, a critical component is ongoing professional development for educators, focusing on active learning, flipped classrooms, and experiential learning. Faculty need the tools and support to adopt student-centered approaches and to be more adaptive to the needs of diverse learners. This shift is crucial in breaking the cycle of traditional lecture-based teaching and moving toward a more engaging, interactive model that fosters critical thinking and creativity. In my opinion, the challenge lies not just in providing training but in creating a culture where innovation in teaching is valued and rewarded. How can institutions encourage this shift? Leadership and peer support play a pivotal role in fostering an environment where pedagogical innovation thrives.

### *Governance and institutional flexibility*

From my perspective, HEIs must adopt more flexible governance structures to facilitate transformational change. But is it possible to maintain academic rigor while encouraging agility? I believe that it is, but achieving this balance requires moving away from rigid, hierarchical decision-making processes and embracing more dynamic models that allow for rapid innovation and responsiveness to external changes. Traditional governance structures, with their slow, centralized decision-making processes, often struggle to adapt quickly to the new demands of today's dynamic educational landscape. This inflexibility can hinder the ability of institutions to seize new opportunities and address emerging challenges.

In my view, a more matrix-based structure - where different departments and functions work collaboratively across boundaries - could help HEIs meet the evolving socio-educational needs of the 21st century. Such a structure allows for greater fluidity in decision-making and fosters cross-functional collaboration. But how can universities shift from a hierarchical to a more matrix-oriented approach? I think it starts with empowering faculty, students, and staff to have a voice in governance, ensuring that diverse perspectives shape the strategic direction of the institution. This approach can foster a culture where leadership is more decentralized, enabling quicker responses to changes in the external environment.

How can HEIs achieve this balance between inclusivity and efficiency? I think a participatory governance model is crucial. When HEIs adopt a matrix structure, they create opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to strategic decisions, leading to a more inclusive and responsive institution. This model encourages collaboration between academic departments, administrative units, and external partners, breaking down the silos that often limit innovation. For instance, in my experience working with universities in Latin America, those that have adopted more fluid governance structures have been better equipped to introduce interdisciplinary programs and engage in international research collaborations. But can we find a balance between stability and the need for rapid adaptation? This remains one of the most pressing challenges for institutions today.

Leadership, in my opinion, should promote a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement, where experimentation and risk-taking are not only encouraged but seen as essential to adapting to the evolving educational landscape. A matrix structure can help HEIs maintain a commitment to academic excellence while fostering the flexibility needed to innovate and adapt. By embracing this governance model, HEIs can create an environment that is not only resilient but also capable of thriving amidst the complexities and demands of the 21st century. This, I believe, is the path forward for universities seeking to remain relevant and impactful in an ever-changing world.

### *Technology Integration*

I believe that the integration of technology into the learning environment is a vital dimension of transformational change. But how can we ensure that technology truly enhances learning rather than just digitizing traditional methods? In my opinion, digital tools can no longer be viewed as optional enhancements but must be fully integrated into the learning and teaching process. Whether through online platforms, artificial intelligence, or virtual reality, I think technology offers new opportunities for personalized learning, flexible delivery methods, and access to global resources. HEIs, in my view, need to invest in the infrastructure and training necessary to harness these technologies effectively, ensuring that they are used to enrich the learning experience, not simply replicate traditional models in digital form.

Moreover, I believe that the development of generic skills is crucial for effectively mastering new and emerging technologies. Why is it that some students excel in using new tools while others struggle to adapt? Skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, and digital literacy, in my opinion, enable students to navigate and make the most of advanced technological tools. As technologies continue to evolve at a rapid pace, I think that learners must be prepared to adapt and learn how to use these tools in diverse contexts. In my view, these generic skills ensure that students are not just passive consumers of technology but active participants who can leverage digital tools for innovation and problem-solving in their respective fields. By focusing on these competencies, I believe that IES can better prepare students for a dynamic and technology-driven job market.

### *Student empowerment and lifelong learning*

Transformational change also requires a fundamental shift in how we view the role of students. I believe that students must be empowered to take ownership of their learning, moving from passive recipients of information to active participants in the educational process (Singh, 2011; Vera, 2021); . But how can institutions foster this sense of ownership among students? This empowerment should be reflected in opportunities for students to co-create their learning experiences, engage in project-based learning, and pursue individualized learning paths. Moreover, education should not end at graduation; institutions must foster a culture of lifelong learning, offering continuous opportunities for professional development and personal growth as students navigate their careers in a rapidly changing world. Can universities create a lifelong relationship with their students, guiding them through the evolving stages of their careers? I believe that such a shift is possible and necessary, ensuring that learning is a continuous journey rather than a finite stage.

A crucial element of student empowerment is the development of generic skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving (Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2018; Vera, 2020; Vera & Tejada, 2020; van Ravenswaaij et al., 2022), which are closely tied to self-regulated learning. In my experience, when students are encouraged to develop these skills, they become better equipped to manage their own learning processes, set goals, and monitor their progress. But how can

universities help students cultivate these self-regulation abilities? I think it involves creating environments that challenge students to reflect on their learning strategies and adapt them as needed.

For example, integrating self-assessment and peer feedback can be powerful tools for fostering self-awareness and autonomy. In this way, students not only gain valuable skills but also learn to navigate the uncertainties of both academic and professional contexts. Can a focus on self-regulated learning ultimately enhance students' readiness for the future? I believe it can, as it encourages learners to be proactive, resilient, and adaptable - qualities that are essential in a world where the ability to learn and adapt is as critical as any technical expertise. These core dimensions, in my view, are essential for higher HEIs to not only survive but thrive in an era of unprecedented change. By embracing these transformational approaches, we can create a more flexible, inclusive, and innovative educational environment that prepares students to face the complex challenges of the future. How can we ensure that these changes are not just short-lived trends but become embedded in the DNA of HEIs? I believe that through committed leadership, a willingness to embrace change, and a focus on both technological and human-centered growth, transformational change can become a lasting reality.

#### *Recommendations for Implementing Transformational Change in Higher Education*

Given the dynamic challenges and opportunities facing higher education in the 21st century, it is essential for institutions to adopt strategies that facilitate meaningful transformation. To remain competitive and relevant in a rapidly changing world, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must rethink their traditional structures and embrace new approaches that foster flexibility, inclusivity, and innovation. Based on insights gathered from diverse contexts, including my experiences in Israel, China, and Latin America, I recommend a series of strategies designed to guide HEIs through this transition. These suggestions are intended to support universities in adapting their governance models, curriculum, and teaching practices to better meet the needs of today's learners and the global landscape.

The following recommendations aim to provide a roadmap for HEIs seeking to navigate the complexities of transformational change (Table 1). By focusing on areas such as governance flexibility, interdisciplinary education, faculty development, and student empowerment, these strategies can help institutions create an environment where continuous improvement and responsiveness to emerging trends become the norm. I believe that by embracing these suggestions, universities can build a foundation for long-term success, ensuring that they not only meet but exceed the evolving expectations of students, faculty and society, as a whole.

**Table 1: Strategies for implementing a transformational change**

Strategy	Description	Goal
Adopt a matrix-based governance structure	Transition to a matrix-based structure where departments collaborate across boundaries, enabling agility and rapid innovation.	Enhance institutional agility and adapt to new opportunities and challenges.
Integrate interdisciplinary curriculum design	Restructure academic programs to include interdisciplinary modules addressing global challenges like sustainability and social equity.	Equip students with diverse skills for complex real-world issues.
Foster faculty development and pedagogical innovation	Provide ongoing professional development for educators to adopt innovative teaching practices such as active learning and flipped classrooms.	Shift towards a more engaging, interactive teaching model.
Strengthen digital infrastructure and technology integration	Invest in advanced digital tools and online platforms to create technology-enhanced learning environments.	Facilitate access to global resources and personalized learning.
Promote a culture of lifelong learning and continuous skills development	Develop programs that cater to learners at different life stages, offering short-term courses and certifications.	Cultivate lifelong learning relationships with students.
Empower students as active participants in the educational process	Foster self-regulated learning by providing platforms for self-assessment and student-led projects.	Develop a sense of ownership and responsibility in students.
Build global partnerships and collaborative research networks	Engage in international research collaborations and faculty exchanges to diversify academic perspectives.	Leverage global knowledge and broaden academic dialogues.
Measure and evaluate progress continuously	Implement mechanisms for regular assessment of initiatives using data-driven insights.	Ensure continuous improvement and responsiveness to change.

Source: Own elaboration.

## Conclusion

The landscape of higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the need to respond to global trends such as digitalization, interdisciplinary collaboration, globalization, and the growing emphasis on lifelong learning. In this context, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must adapt their structures, curricula, and teaching methodologies to remain relevant and impactful. The adoption of matrix-based governance models offers a way to balance the need for academic rigor with the flexibility required to seize new opportunities and address emerging challenges. By shifting decision-making processes away from rigid hierarchies, HEIs can foster a culture of agility, allowing them to navigate the complexities of the modern educational landscape.

Additionally, the integration of interdisciplinary education, coupled with a focus on developing generic skills, ensures that students are equipped to tackle real-world problems with diverse perspectives. As I have observed in countries such as Israel, China, and throughout Latin America, this approach can break down academic silos and enrich the learning experience. These efforts must be complemented by a commitment to faculty development and the creation of digital learning environments that cater to the needs of today's tech-savvy students. The emphasis on digital infrastructure is crucial not only for delivering knowledge but also for supporting the self-regulated learning and adaptability that modern students need to thrive.

Ultimately, achieving transformational change in higher education requires a holistic approach that embraces student empowerment, fosters global collaboration, and cultivates a culture of lifelong learning. The strategies proposed above provide a roadmap for institutions seeking to align with these new realities. By embracing flexibility in governance, fostering interdisciplinary approaches, and investing in faculty and technology, HEIs can create environments that are both inclusive and innovative. This, in turn, positions them to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, ensuring that they continue to serve their students, communities, and the global academic community effectively.

## Final reflection

In a world that is constantly evolving, the need for transformation in higher education has never been more pressing. As global challenges become more complex and interconnected, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must move beyond traditional practices and adopt innovative approaches that can prepare students for the realities of the 21st century. Transformational change is not simply about adjusting curricula or introducing new technologies; it is about reimagining the very essence of what education can be. I believe that by embracing more flexible governance structures, fostering interdisciplinary learning, and integrating digital tools, HEIs can create a dynamic environment that is responsive to both local and global needs.

However, the journey towards transformational change requires a willingness to challenge long-standing norms and to view education through a more holistic lens. It calls for leaders who are prepared to take risks, for educators who are eager to adopt new methodologies, and for students who are empowered to take charge of their own learning. This shift is not without its challenges, but the potential rewards—enhanced learning experiences, stronger connections between knowledge and practice, and more adaptable graduates—make it a journey worth undertaking. In my view, HEIs that embrace these changes will be better positioned to serve their students, their communities, and the world.

Ultimately, the future of higher education depends on our collective ability to adapt and innovate. I invite institutions to see transformational change not as a daunting challenge, but as an opportunity to redefine their purpose and impact in an ever-changing world. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, encouraging collaboration across disciplines and borders, and committing to lifelong learning, HEIs can ensure that they remain relevant, resilient, and capable of shaping a brighter future. The time for change is now, and together, we can build an educational landscape that truly meets the demands of the 21st century.

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