

Don't Look Up; Look Forward: How are Global Trends Shaping Education?



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If you are a film buff or have opened your social media accounts lately, in fact, even if you have been living under a rock, you will have probably heard of the film Don't Look Up. Equally acclaimed and obliterated by the audience and critics, this film tells the story of two scientists who discover a super-sized comet on a direct collision course with Earth, and face great difficulties in making themselves heard by politicians and the media.

Future-proofing education by looking forward

Globalisation and digitalisation have connected people, cities, countries and continents in ways that vastly increase our individual and collective potential. But the same forces have also made the world more volatile, more complex, more uncertain and more ambiguous. The world has seen a growing disconnect between the infinite growth imperative and the finite resources of our planet; between the financial economy and the real economy; between the wealthy and the

poor; between the concept of our gross domestic product and the well-being of people; between technology and social needs; and between governance and the perceived voicelessness of people.

No one should hold education responsible for all of this, but neither should anyone underestimate the role that people's knowledge, skills, attitudes and values play in social and economic development and in shaping our cultural context. But while digital technologies and globalisation have disruptive implications for our economic and social structure, those implications are not predetermined. It is the nature of our collective responses to these disruptions that determines their outcomes – the continuous interplay between the technological frontier and the cultural, social, institutional and economic agents that we mobilise in response.

The OECD has long advocated future-thinking policymaking to prepare for shocks and surprises – be it climate change, digitalisation or pandemics. This is important because the future will always surprise us. For a start, intangibles are the driver of today's economy, and that makes education so central. An example



of their power is the growth of tech companies compared to the declining revenue of the traditional companies that dominated the Fortune 500 decades ago. The great thing is that, unlike tangible assets, knowledge can be used repeatedly and in multiple places simultaneously, which explains the rapid growth of big tech companies in just a few years. In education, we should ask ourselves more about what competences are needed to participate in an increasingly intangible economy. What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values do we need to generate new ideas and products? Or for organising and governing new ways of working and producing? And what is the role of new technologies in facilitating learning?

And big tech firms are becoming important players in education, especially through the provision of digital education platforms and services. What are the implications for education governance? What kinds of (public-private) co-operation and leadership are needed to deliver public value?

Over time, we have also seen a shift in the way we use our time towards leisure, family and political life; we work less, even if it sometimes doesn't quite look so. Can education help individuals, young and old, to develop the competences needed to engage meaningfully across all aspects of life?

In 2020, temporary employment accounted for 24 per cent of dependent employment for youths, compared to 11 per cent for the

general population. This corresponds to a seven per cent increase compared to 1980. Part-time contracts have also been rising over the last two decades, particularly among young workers. What are the consequences for on-the-job learning and training if increasing numbers of workers have no permanent employer to sponsor such education? What does this shift mean for education systems, formal or non-formal, and for education professionals?

What is the potential of new training opportunities emerging from the gig economy, such as peer networks and crowd-curated resources, to fill this gap?

Knowledge also means power. Whereas only an elite few produced traditional encyclopaedias or the mass

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media of the 20th century, today’s social media and internet sites like Wikipedia are fed by the masses who generate the content. The number of pages in all wikis grew from about 10,000 to over 250 million in just 20 years. But are people ready for this? The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that Korea, Singapore and parts of China are the only jurisdictions where more than half of the 15-year-olds are fit for the digital world – like figuring out fake news. In most countries with comparable data, the majority of students still have limited digital navigation skills or not even the basics. So how can we better support all individuals to access and use knowledge effectively? What types of education are needed to enable students, teachers and education leaders to do that effectively? And what (digital) skills and attitudes are needed to effectively evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of information? How can we support teachers to validate the knowledge they use in their practice? Our social circles also influence our access to knowledge. Should educational institutions work more actively to strengthen (digital) social ties? If so, how?

Education must prepare for environmental shocks

The data also highlight that meeting the global goal of net zero emissions by 2050 will require bold action. For example, in the field of energy, as demand for renewables has risen and their technology has improved, the costs of renewables have fallen. However, while the availability and affordability of renewables have increased, we continue to burn fossil fuels like coal, oil and natural gas at an unsustainable rate, and our carbon footprint keeps growing.

More remains to be done in our fight against climate change, and education has a pivotal role to play. Education is key to providing all citizens not only with an understanding of the science behind the climate crisis but also its socio-demographic, political and moral implications. Moreover, education can make a fundamental contribution by offering learners the space to take direct action in their communities while fostering pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.

Training systems must support people to continuously learn, unlearn and relearn as we transit towards “greener” economies and societies.

In parallel, our research systems must depend on appropriate policies and resources to engage in the kind of long-term, risk-taking research that we need to innovate our way out of our current unsustainable growth model while still ensuring shared prosperity.

Furthermore, as large employers and consumers, education systems must “green up” their infrastructure and operations, enhancing their environmental performance while preparing for the challenges already underway, such as the increased likelihood and severity of extreme events like floods and droughts. These are not issues from a distant future; they are happening now.

We shouldn’t ignore the trends shaping education

Whether you’re a fan or not, Don’t Look Up raises an important message, reminding us that, in our global and interconnected world, incremental threats like climate change as well as abrupt systemic disruptions like COVID-19, will continue to challenge our ways of living, working and learning. Most importantly, the film tells us that we cannot and should not look away from these trends. ■