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DIMENSIONS OF TRUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION





Rwanda provides an illustrative case. Over the past decade, the institution has redesigned its degree programs to balance *hard skills* (disciplinary and technical training) with *soft skills* such as teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and ethical awareness. Central to these reforms is the integration of ten “Graduate Attributes,” ranging from research and creativity to digital literacy and financial acumen. The aim is to graduate not only degree holders but all-rounded individuals ready for the workplace and society. A deliberate connection between the academic knowledge and the real world gets designed within the curricula for the learners’ agility and resilience enhancement.

Equally important, the University of Rwanda has institutionalized collaboration with industry in curriculum development and review. Employers contribute to program design, share real-life cases in classrooms, and host students in project-based internships. Annual forums bring together CEOs, human resource managers, and policymakers to evaluate the university’s offerings. This constant dialogue ensures that curricula remain relevant, enhancing employer trust while equipping students with transferable skills.

Towards Lifelong Learning and Digital Fluency

Beyond curriculum reform, trust in higher education also depends on preparing students for a world in which knowledge and skills must be continuously updated. Digital literacy and fluency in artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly indispensable, not only for employability but also for active citizenship in a technology-driven society. Universities that instil habits of lifelong learning, re-skilling, and adaptability inspire confidence that their graduates will remain relevant long after graduation. This preparedness is inculcated in students right from the very entry during the inductions period all through with the career guidance support to graduation. Employers and stakeholders at large too, build from this and at the end, it enhances the trust in higher education not just by the industry and partners but also by the students themselves.

In conclusion therefore, the debate over skills versus degrees should not be about choosing one over the other. Instead, it must focus on how higher education can blend knowledge and practice to maintain its relevance and public trust. Universities need to redefine themselves from being distant and disconnected from the community environments and becoming ivory towers with theoretical pursuits but instead, blend their curricula with more practical engagements with the support from industry partners. Degrees without skills undermine confidence in universities; skills without foundational theory lack sustainability. Trust in higher education will be preserved only if institutions commit to continuous self-evaluation, curricular reform, and active engagement with industry and society.

Ultimately, the future belongs not to “skills versus degrees,” but to skills with degrees. Higher education must therefore be trusted as a system that equips learners with knowledge, practical competence, and the resilience to thrive in an unpredictable world. Universities should understand that today’s

training is not just for degrees, but also more of the applied skills to render the degree more relevant.

29 Trust Deficit in Higher Education – Causes and Pathways to Renewal



by **G.S. Bajpai**, Vice-Chancellor, National Law University Delhi, India

This article unpacks several facets of trust in higher education, discusses factors contributing to the seemingly pervasive lack of trust, and recommends key actions to build or rebuild trust in these critical institutions. Trust in higher education is not a monolithic and stable thing; it is multivalent, including both the products of institutions and the values they symbolise.

Academic Trust

The heart of any academic institution is its academic honesty. Trust in this domain is also founded in the confidence in the quality of teaching, research and learning outcomes as being of high quality, ethically produced and intellectually robust. The students themselves, their parents, employers, and the public as a whole need to have faith in the genuineness and quality of the awards they are receiving. Acts like plagiarism, cheating, gaming of research or grade inflation seriously violate this trust.

Institutional Transparency and Accountability

Decisions are better made in a transparent environment. This is about admissions policies, rankings, financial policies, accreditation and admission standards. Trust gets corroded when institutions of higher learning are mired in scandals, rigged entry exams, hidden charges, or appointments based on nepotism. Academic, community, and donor stakeholders demand that institutions be responsible to the students, faculty, donors, and community representatives.

Student-Centric Values and Support

A second crucial institution-level factor is the degree to which institutions express sincere aspiration to develop the whole student. And this includes not only academic guidance, but also emotional, psychological, and career guidance. Increased student burnout, a lack of mental health provision and restricted access to mentoring are all factors that help reinforce the impression that institutions are 'more interested in bureaucratic or financial imperatives than student welfare'.

Equity, Inclusion, and Fairness

Trust in higher education rests on a belief that institutions treat all students equally, independent of their social class, caste, gender, language, and disability. We can say “inclusivity” all day long, but it doesn’t mean anything until we start to do things inclusively. If marginalised students face systemic discrimination,



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feel underrepresented in faculty or leadership, and do not have support systems in place, it breeds detachment and resentment.” A fair and inclusive culture is a core driver for longer-term trust.

Causes Behind Growing Distrust in Higher Education

The fracture of faith in higher education has happened for a reason. There are a number of economic, structural, and cultural reasons for why this is happening. The most evident is that of the commercialisation of education. The increasing expense of attending higher education is a correlated issue. The cost of sending a child to university has skyrocketed for middle-class families with no promise of a commensurate return on investment. The cost-benefit is in doubt, leading some to ask whether college is worth it. A second reason is the mismatch between academic knowledge and employability. The problem for businesses is that, although students are certified, they often lack job readiness, which is a common complaint among employers. This results in an employment crisis for educated youth, and disintegrates the utility of education. In addition, the lack of academic freedom and campus politicisation is likewise disillusioning the public.

Consequences of Distrust

Inclusivity is a problem here as well. Students from underserved communities are generally underrepresented or unwelcome at elite institutions. Ignoring a variety of differences — whether they are linguistic, cultural or socio-economic can isolate huge swaths of the student body. The existence of what is known as degree mills that offer subpar education is a huge discredit in the world of education.

Restoring and Cultivating Trust in Higher Education

Rebuilding confidence in higher education requires a holistic approach that ensures transparency, value, diversity and ethics in colleges and universities. Institutions must ensure transparency in their admissions, fee, and assessment policies. Second, the quality of the work is essential, and that should be assured by peer review, author training, non-profit rent-seekers, and ethical research values to maintain the credibility of the publication. Third, aligning education with industry needs through introduction of internships, interdisciplinary learning and industry-academia collaboration. Fourthly, investing in mental health services and mentorship are going to be an essential area that the institution must focus on if it is bills itself to be a campus of student well-being/safety.

Confidence in higher education is not an entitlement; it’s something that has to be earned. With higher education

responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse and global society, colleges and universities must operate transparently, equitably, and in good faith.

In a time of uncertainty and rapid change, restoring trust in education is not merely an option; it is a necessity for a more just, innovative, and enlightened future.

30 The University of the XXI Century: Between Stagnation and Renewal



by **Maria Amata Garito**, *President & Rector, International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, Italy*

The university as part of a globalized and interconnected knowledge society has reached a turning point: the internet, the metaverse, and artificial intelligence are bringing about radical changes to patterns of knowledge storage and communication. For the first time in human history, physical co-presence no longer binds our minds and bodies. Digital natives already live their lives on the internet, sometimes more intensely than in the real world. More and more people choose to opt for non-traditional training institutions, i.e. schools and universities, to develop their knowledge and skills. A global pedagogical society has now exploded, increasingly expanding thanks also to the models available online of generative artificial intelligence. In this context, traditional universities must be capable of reinventing themselves and emerging from atrophy. Their transformation is no longer a possible choice but is already an inevitable imperative.

The transfer of knowledge and skills can no longer be linked to nation-states alone. Citizens of the 21st century must be able to interact and cooperate in a reality in which cultural, political, and religious diversity conditions invaded many aspects of the life of every single individual.

The universities of a globalized and interconnected society must overcome geographical borders and constitute themselves as a network. Globalization, interdependence, and communication technologies walk together today and can give universities tools that allow them to develop new models of collaboration in research, teaching, the creation of common programs, and

“Citizens of the 21st century must be able to interact and cooperate in a reality in which cultural, political, and religious diversity conditions invaded many aspects of the life of every single individual.”