

Should Educational Attainment Be a Free and Open Common Good?

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To understand the import of the question in the title, first consider that progressive policy leaders around the world are asking educators to scale up **educational attainment** – *the proportion of adults holding a trusted tertiary credential*. For example, President Obama’s goal is to move the attainment needle from 40% to 60% in ten years. With adults (25 years or older) accounting for 2/3 of a population of 300 million, achieving the goal would mean scaling tertiary credential holders from about 80 million to at least 120 million over ten years. That’s a tall order, made taller by a growing population!

The goal of scaling attainment puts the democratic principle of equal opportunity on steroids. The attainment challenge is to increase the proportion of tertiary credential holders in *macro* populations, which, in light of economic demographics trends, implies the need to increase the proportion of low- and middle-income students in the pipeline. This combination of these goals is known in the UK as “widening participation.”

The UK’s [Open University](#) is a prescient, now mature and globally admired innovation. The OU has widened participation by opening up tertiary access to low- and middle-income students, while also doing more than its part to scale up the proportion of adults holding tertiary credentials. The OU also addresses attainment’s **three-way affordability conundrum**: *the need to lower the costs of attainment not only to low- and middle-income students, but also to the institutions and governments that financially support them*.

The OU arose from rethinking teaching, learning, and credentialing in a context not unlike the interconnected challenges encoded here as the attainment challenge. The result was a new institution, not the pursuit of incremental improvements to traditional credentialing practices among UK universities.

Today’s tertiary revenue model is largely based on enrollments, not on credentials granted. Consider, instead, **competency-based learning**, which puts the focus on learning outcomes and their evaluation, rather than on enrollments compensated. For reasons of trust in the integrity of credentials, which are proxies for learning accomplishments, also consider unbundling education into learning services and independent learning evaluation services. The latter should include at least periodic, age-appropriate, independent evaluations of the common core of basic fluencies and critical thinking skills that foster learning readiness throughout a lifetime.

The OU in the UK, Athabasca University (Canada’s Open University), and [Western Governors University](#) (WGU) in the US are making inroads into competency-based credentialing, in some cases coupled with independent learning evaluations. These institutions and others are learning how to credential learning that draws significantly on **open educational resources** (OER) – content and other resources openly and, typically, freely accessible. At an extreme of OER are **massive online open courses/modules** (MOOC) in which one expert or a network of cross-institutional experts facilitates learning among thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of students at one time. The OU’s [OpenLearn](#), the [Khan Academy](#), and [ISKME’s OER Commons](#) are OER examples, while [Connectivism and Connective Knowledge 2011](#) is an interesting MOOC from Athabasca University.

WGU also practices the **flex strategy** that can, from the perspective of the attainment challenge, optimize what many try to differentiate as online, hybrid, and blended learning. *The flex strategy provides a full array of scalable, online (asynchronous) academic and administrative self-services to all students, as a means to achieve economies of scale in per-student self-service expenses, while focusing the high-touch faculty effort on designing and affordably delivering the individualized expert help that most students need (and expect) as they follow a learning pathway tailored to meet individualized needs and circumstances*. The resulting mantra for student, faculty, and institutional success might then read:

High-tech self-service when wanted; high-touch individualized help when needed.

The examples above are not random acts of progress. They purposefully use a digital palette of academic strategies from which a holistic attainment strategy can now be more broadly developed. The cost efficiencies and productivity increases that drive the non-education global service economy, after all, typically derive from technology-enabled innovations and service process redesigns. The examples and strategies above illustrate that similar results are within reach in education, if, like the OU and the WGU, we reverse-engineer tomorrow's academic and financial models working backwards from the learning goals of the attainment challenge to a redesigned education enterprise.

Attainment is a **common good** – both a private and public good. It is clearly a private economic good to students and to education employees, while governments and others invest in attainment because they see it as public good. H.G. Wells captured the common-good essence of attainment by warning in 1920 that, “*Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.*” Scaling up attainment is a rational bet for advancing and sustaining social, economic, and environmental justice – thus improving our chances of survival.

To think differently about scaling up attainment as a common good, keep in mind the above examples of technology-enabled innovation, while also thinking about the Internet, the common-good network of networks that operates around the world “as if it were one” network. The Internet/Web is a paragon of global, open, self-regulation, controlled by no one entity, private or public, yet still racing forward as a driver of exponential growth in economic and social wealth – exactly the policy goal behind the attainment challenge!

The Internet Society was created a few years into the Internet era as a hedge against what economists' call a **tragedy of the commons** – *misuse, purposeful or not, that might diminish or destroy the common benefits shared by all users.* We know now that the Internet Society's open governance practices meet the openness criteria recommended by Elinor Ostrom, whose work on the economic governance of common-good natural resource made her a Nobel Laureate in Economics in 2009. Unlike the Internet experience, the educational credentialing experience is not open. We need an Ostrom-like, open economic governance organization for educational attainment!

The crux of Ostrom's findings, translated into the attainment context, would have all of the economic beneficiaries of the attainment marketplace represented at an open economic governance table. Open economic governance implies equitable representation for educational organizations and their external investors – students, governments, donors, employers, and suppliers. My candidate for the economic governance of the attainment marketplace is the **Education Leadership Commons** (ELC). I recently updated the concept in a draft paper, [Is Education's Past Its 2050 Prologue?](#) The goal, of course, is to scale attainment while simultaneously resolving the three-way affordability conundrum in order to make a credential achievable and affordable to all students, especially to the growing economic demographic of low- and middle-income students.

Nothing is free, but by making the common-good educational attainment marketplace as open as possible, we can make it scalable and as free as possible to those who most need financial assistance to participate in Well's race. Let's create an ELC movement to help *scale attainment, affordability, and accountability*, and then go on to win the race between education and catastrophe.

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