

# A 2021 Outlook for Professional, Continuing and Online Education

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# Outlook for 2021: 10 Trends to Consider for Professional, Continuing and Online (PCO) Education

2020 was a year of accelerated and disruptive change. The COVID-19 global pandemic created a “new normal” that many still find unfamiliar. Even when the pandemic ends and becomes a bad memory, our world will have been changed forever. Ways of doing business that were already uncomfortable for Boomers and older generations, such as video meetings, virtual learning and electronic cash, have become new standards in the world economy.

Higher education has also had to grapple with unprecedented challenges this past year. The forced transition to remote learning across all institutional levels was a major shift in the industry at large. As institutions have navigated these paradigms, they have had to develop long-term strategies for the future. To help guide this strategic preparation across the industry, UPCEA has developed an outlook for 2021. The following are 10 trends which it sees as highly influential and imperative to understand as we enter the new year and continue to navigate pandemic-related shifts.

## 1: Increasing Dependence on PCO Education for Additional Revenues

Pandemic-related challenges will persist, increasing higher education’s continued reliance on professional, continuing, and online education (PCO) units for additional revenues. These revenue streams have become critical resources as higher education manages pandemic-related obstacles. With unemployment at its worst since the Depression era, an overwhelming number of professionals have been seeking upskilling.<sup>1</sup> A Strada’s Center for Consumer Insights poll found increased interest in training among potential adult learners with 42% of respondents saying COVID-19 has made them more likely to enroll.<sup>2</sup> Despite the overwhelming challenges colleges and universities have been facing, professional, continuing, and online education has become a key source of revenue and will continue to play a critical role in 2021.

## 2: Online Delivery Increasing Competition for Degrees

The forced transition to online learning has normalized the delivery method. Higher education has been shifting towards online learning for some time, but this has been rapidly accelerated by the pandemic. No longer can traditionalists claim that online learning is inferior as they will find themselves adapting to online instruction to improve learning.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/08/april-2020-jobs-report/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/17/working-adults-increasingly-interested-postsecondary-education-more-skeptical-about>

With online learning becoming a part of the new normal, competition for awarding degrees will increase. In-person factors, like geographic location, will be less important for prospective students. Online education provides increased resources from anywhere and everywhere. With such access comes increased competition and institutions must look to differentiate themselves in 2021 as they navigate the increasingly competitive environment encouraged by the normalization of online delivery.<sup>3</sup>

### **3: Employer Demand for Alternative Credentials**

Alternative credentials have seen an unprecedented demand from employers. (Eventually, “alternative” will be replaced with a more normalized term.) The pandemic has exposed the growing need for upskilling across the workforce. Some companies started to recognize alternative credentials as important in maintaining a competitive advantage in employee satisfaction and development. An increasing number are using alternative credentials to market themselves to potential hires.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Google was active in the post-secondary education space, and continued its investment in July of 2020 by offering three new six-month Google Career Certificates which will be treated on par with four-year degrees in its hiring practices.<sup>5</sup> An increasing number of employers will likely offer alternative credentials to their employees in 2021.

Evolving industries such as cybersecurity and cannabis product manufacturing, retailing and distribution are also better aligned for alternative credentials, as opposed to the creation of new degrees (under a slow-moving academic approval process).

### **4: Unbundling the Degree and Creating More Stackable Elements**

The pandemic has shed light on not just the cost of a degree, but the components that comprise it. Students have begun to question each line item and its respective price tag, unbundling the degree to see what is really inside.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the pandemic, the status quo was paying a high price for a range of offerings and resources, motivated by future economic prospects. Now, the bundle includes one component: online classes.<sup>7</sup> Students have begun to question what a degree provides as they primarily want to learn certain skills to improve their economic prospects. An increasing number of institutions have made their offerings stackable.<sup>8</sup> Making individual components stackable so they can build upon each other incentivizes the student and the institution. In 2021, an increasing number of institutions will unbundle the degree and create stackable components.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/reimagining-higher-education-in-the-united-states>

<sup>4</sup> <https://monitor.icef.com/2020/08/demand-for-online-learning-and-alternative-credentials-surges-during-covid-19/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanraig/2020/07/24/the-great-unbundling-of-higher-education-starts-now/?sh=ab779f46ed22>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/students-stacking-credentials-route-degree/>

## 5: More Generationally Focused Enrollment Management Systems

Currently, professional, continuing, and online education units have targeted their offerings to Generation X and Millennials. However, by the end of the pandemic, the new adult learner will be a different generation, Generation Z. With the oldest members of Generation Z turning 25, PCO units will become more focused as this generation is unlike any other. It will have a higher percentage of college-educated professionals and be the first cohort that was raised in a mobile and wired society.<sup>9</sup> Institutions in 2021 will revise their PCO units to meet the preferences and needs of Generation Z as they enter the adult learning fray, making generationally focused enrollment management systems increasingly important.

## 6: Influencers Promoting Programs

With the higher education environment becoming more and more competitive, marketing has never been more critical and complex. Institutions have been experimenting with new ways to engage Generation Z through innovative marketing techniques. Colleges and universities will increasingly use influencers in 2021 to navigate the competitive landscape and promote their programs. Influencer marketing has gained popularity across many industries due to its ability to harness word of mouth on a broader scale.<sup>10</sup> Virtually any individual associated with an institution can become an influencer and be a component of this marketing strategy.<sup>11</sup> Schools are learning they can use social media to their advantage by hiring individuals with a larger-than-average following who can relate to their audience and intentionally endorse their offerings. Student athletes, student government representatives, club leaders, and celebrity alumni are just a few examples of potential influencers institutions can leverage as they enter 2021 and look to develop an enhanced, cutting-edge marketing strategy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://upcea.edu/generation-z-new-cohort-adult-learners/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.caylor-solutions.com/how-to-kick-off-your-influencer-marketing-strategy-for-higher-education>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## 7: Accountability Between Higher Education and the Workforce

With the growing availability of data, 2021 is expected to be a year of accountability. Information linking curriculum, job skills, competencies, and labor trends is becoming widely accessible. Higher education institutions will have a greater responsibility to align their offerings to the needs of the workforce.<sup>13</sup> These data ecosystems promote accountability by identifying best practices, those that produce greater retention, more success, and focus on the learning needs of all populations.<sup>14</sup> Societal accountability has become a new normal as data has become more readily available. Data ecosystems are expected to continue to encourage accountability between higher education and the workforce.

One example is the integration of labor market data, job analytics, skills inventories, geographic information and academic sources (syllabus, course descriptions, career and credential information, etc.) by EMSI.

## 8: Blockchain and Higher Education

Blockchain is anticipated to be the “21<sup>st</sup> century approach to documenting learning.”<sup>15</sup> MIT has been using blockchain since 2015 to support the secure dissemination of academic credentials in order to track and manage these accomplishments across the institution.<sup>16</sup> There are many potential applications for blockchain in higher education that may become a reality in the near future. Nationally, ledgering digital credentials to improve the standardization and supporting documentation, according to Inside Higher Ed, could be the next major application. The American Council on Education has launched a blockchain innovation challenge to support electronic credentialing and ledger dissemination.<sup>17</sup>

Blockchain has already advanced in many critical industries and higher education will ultimately follow. Blockchain is essential to restore trust in our economy and dependent industries that require verification, inventorying, and ledgering of transactions in a complex supply chain, and that are dependent on multiple or complex transactions where confidence in a system is essential, including manufacturing, distribution, finance, and education, among others.

## 9: Virtual Reality and Virtual Learning

Virtual reality is expected to continue to revolutionize educational experiences in 2021. This immersive learning technology has become increasingly applicable as virtual learning has accelerated due to the pandemic. Virtual reality applications in higher education can span from anthropology students exploring and examining ancient Egyptian ruins without traveling internationally to medical students learning and practicing surgical procedures using simulated

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/rethinking-higher-education/new-data-driven-ecosystem>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/blockchain-future-higher-ed>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Blockchain-Innovation-Challenge.aspx>

patients or cadavers.<sup>18</sup> The technology facilitates undoing mistakes and taking notes while simulating learning experiences that really come to life.<sup>19</sup>

Pre-pandemic, the technology industry was pushing new forms of virtual reality, technologies and applications that were deemed interesting, but not necessarily essential. These tools and applications were considered enhancements to learning, but with the pandemic, the advancement and investment into creating fully virtual labs has accelerated. Institutions required by their accreditors to have a face-to-face or live capstone experience are looking into virtual reality as an alternative. While some institutions adopted these alternatives during the pandemic, they are only a stop-gap measure. Evaluators will require evidence of success and positive outcomes.

## 10: An Upended Job Market

In addition to reskilling and upskilling, the job market has shifted favorably for job changers, but not for location-secure existing employees. An employee might feel secure if their employer was reluctant to recruit a new employee due to search and travel costs. However, the pandemic has shown that we can work from anywhere. Therefore, a high-performing home-based worker can seek better job options which may affect those currently in such positions. This remote worker can earn more and will have more choices. According to a recent survey by economists from the Harvard Business School, one in six workers is projected to continue working from home or co-working at least two days a week when the pandemic is over.<sup>20</sup>

Employers will have access to a new high-performing stable of remote workers. This will create both opportunities and challenges as employers will fight to attract new remote talent, but also retain these high performers. Education can play a major role with retention, as well as preparing the workforce for a new more automated economy.

## Conclusion

Each of these trends exhibit the impact of the pandemic on operations across the industry as institutions navigate the new normal. This has promoted digital change that will revolutionize learning experiences for future students. 2021 is anticipated to be a year of digital acceleration and credential innovation across higher education, as well as a normalization of processes. In order to achieve long-term growth and sustainability, it is critical for institutions to monitor and evaluate these trends despite the short-term challenges they face during the pandemic. More importantly, it will be a time to assess risks; move away from non-strategic, unprofitable, legacy programs; programmatically innovate and experiment in strategic areas; and also re-align infrastructures for a new world of educational credentials, programs, and services.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://collegiseducation.com/news/technology/augmented-reality-and-virtual-reality-in-higher-ed/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://collegiseducation.com/news/technology/augmented-reality-and-virtual-reality-in-higher-ed/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/just-small-shift-remote-work-could-change-everything/614980/>