

# **The future of higher education: the wheel is spinning but is the hamster alive?**

**Alastair Summerlee**

University of Guelph, Guelph, Canada

asummerl@uoguelph.ca

I remember a schoolteacher who used to say “The wheel is spinning but the hamster is dead”. Mr. Houston was trying to point out to his students that they were going through the motions of learning but were not really achieving their full potential. In recent years, as a host of fiscal and societal pressures constraint universities and force them to do more with less, Mr Houston’s aphorism begins to rings true about higher education in most jurisdictions. As class sizes increase, examinations more routinized and government efforts to insist on accountability are interpreted as graduating more students, we push students onto a factory treadmill of education. They go through the motions of learning and even emerge with credits but they do not realize their full potential. The wheels are spinning, but are the hamsters alive at the end of their university careers?

To be sustainable and truly effective, universities should re-think university education. We should re-examine our promise to students and, in the longer-term, to society. We need to think about how to create learning experiences that are magical, engage and inspire imagination, provide opportunities for success and failure, integrate learning across disciplines and provide experience in fostering creativity and entrepreneurship. Too often our current sausage-stuffing approach squeezes out difference and seeks to homogenize and standardized the learning experience.

Such changes are radical to contemplate but they are needed if universities are to remain relevant in society through the remainder of this century. We need to focus on learning experiences that create citizen scholars: individuals who are not only committed to the world around them but have the skills and confidence to make a difference. Successful examples of models that focus on producing a well-rounded citizen-scholar will be presented and discussed. At the same time, the challenges, commonalities and opportunities of these alternate approaches will be aired.

If universities and university teachers are to hold back the tsunami of pressures that we face, we must think about, and adapt and adopt different approaches to teaching and learning so we can save our hamsters. We need to rescue them from the treadmill of existence and help them realize their full potential as citizen scholars of tomorrow.