Yidan Prize Conference Series: Europe 2019

Frankopan Hall, Jesus College, Cambridge

4 March 2019
Introduction

Following the success of the Yidan Prize Summit 2018 in Hong Kong, the Yidan Prize Foundation brought the important debate about education to Cambridge University in 2019.

The Yidan Prize Conference Series: Europe was held in the Frankopan Hall at Jesus College in Cambridge on the 4 March 2019. The conference brought together insightful speakers, including Yidan Prize Laureate for Education Research Larry Hedges, Head of Research at the LEGO Foundation Bo Stjerne Thomsen and Chief Executive of the Behavioural Insights Team and National What Works Advisor David Halpern among others.

The World Educating For the Future index (WEFFI) was also unveiled at the conference by Trisha Suresh, Senior Analyst at The Economist Intelligence Unit in Singapore and a lead author of the WEFFI report. Key takeaways from the WEFFI 2018 were also presented to the media at a media lunch in London on the 5th of March.
In his opening address, Charles Chen Yidan emphasised the importance of finding actionable steps to improve global education. “What makes the Yidan Prize Conference series different? Let me use one word to capture its essence – action. You heard it right – the Yidan Prize Conference Series is a platform to facilitate actionable outcomes to improve global education.” He explained how society ought to focus on how we learn, rather than how much we learn. “That’s why I set up the Yidan Prize,” he said, in order “to focus on education research and education development from the very beginning.”

Conferences like this one encourage collaboration and innovative ideas that will help to tackle the most pressing challenges facing the world.

“We don’t want to just talk the talk, we want to walk the walk”
Professor Stephen TOOPE, Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge noted that when we think about education at Cambridge, we think about the education provided to students. But the Faculty of Education is also the centre of world-leading research in the sphere. The faculty works in and alongside schools to gather first-hand evidence of what works in practice and what doesn’t.

Professor Toope also explained that the university needs to actively encourage applications from students who might have been less advantaged in their educational journey. Cambridge aims “to change the world through education,” he said. “In this respect, our aspirations match those of the Yidan Prize…For us, there is simply nothing more important.”

He explained that Cambridge is one of UK’s most unequal cities, which is why the University of Cambridge has teamed up with other universities and colleges to improve access to higher education with NEACO, the Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach. NEACO aims to help young people from East Anglia with little or no experience of university to explore the world of higher education.

Cambridge shares its findings nationally and takes trials oversees to produce results that will be available worldwide.
Professor Ian White, Master of Jesus College, paid tribute to Charles Chen Yidan for his charitable endeavours. He praised the Yidan Prize founder’s understanding of the importance of education as a way to transform the world, as well as his ability to look globally, beyond accepted ways of thinking.

Welcoming the audience to Jesus College, he explained that the college has had a long tradition of education. Founded as a place of religious learning for women in 1130s, 350 years later it became a school for boys and then a religious college to train the clergy.

He noted how little had changed over this long history when it comes to learning and highlighted the importance of establishing the underlying principles at the heart of education.

He congratulated Yidan Prize Laurates 2018 for their ability to first focus on these underlying principles and then utilise them to create real change in the field of education.
The link between education and economic achievement is undeniable, according to Professor Hedges. Nations with better educated populations will be more successful in the global economy. Individuals within countries will also be more economically successful if they’re better educated. Therefore, if the benefits of education aren’t shared equally within society, it could lead to social disruption.

In the 20th century countries merely implemented universal education at the secondary level, but the highest levels of education are reserved for elites. Providing this kind of education to more students poses new challenges. The nature of relevant skills in the future is going to be dynamic, it’s going to change rapidly. How will we meet this challenge?

To provide equal access to quality education, it’s important to understand what works. We need scientific research in education. Researchers will need to develop new relations with schools and other settings in which education occurs. An intermediary between the research literature and the consumer of research findings is needed.

A relatively new idea is the research clearinghouse – an entity that looks for all of the research evaluating a ‘treatment’, evaluates that research, synthesizes it, and makes it easy to see all of the research pertaining to a particular issue or product. There are now over 30 research clearing houses, mainly in the U.S.; A critical function that research clearinghouses provide is evaluation of research evidence.
What makes a great education?

Parental engagement in early life and having access to open-ended problem solving and group activities has been shown to help

**Professor Paul Ramchandani** from the University of Cambridge noted that at birth, there are approximately 100 billion neurons in a baby’s brain. About 60,000 connections are cut away every second because they’re not used anymore, so engaging with babies from birth is important. Early parent-child play is a key factor in child cognitive development and socio-economic development (both are essential for learning in school).

**Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen**, the head of research at the LEGO Foundation explained that thinking about great education as part of our childhood and adapting that to new generations is important. A great education needs to rely on the science behind learning. Research shows that children learn best when they’re passionate about what they do and when they collaborate with others and have the freedom to try different things.

According to one study across 7 countries, students say that education is repetitive and lacks opportunities to try new things; there is too much focus of assessments. We are moving now from knowledge-based education from skills-based education. Education is about opportunities to think about how we can develop knowledge and skills together.

The challenges facing every child having a great education are huge, according to **Heather Saunders** from the Global Partnership for Education, working with 67 low-income countries, including those affected by fragility and conflict.
The role of NGOs in promoting education for all

Representatives from three NGOs -- Clover Youth, Student Hubs and CamFed – spoke about their roles in widening access to quality education and improving attainment

Based in Guangzhou, China, Clover Youth helps children of migrant workers build the confidence and the skills for pursuing a fulfilling life. They train student volunteers to facilitate affordable programs, such as weekend and summer camps, focusing on exploring the city and visiting universities and vocational schools to help with future planning. Some 4,989 migrant children have benefited from this work with the help of 1840 volunteers, many of whom are former participants themselves. Gaining trust of the kids’ parents and building relationships within the community are both important to ensure greatest impact.

Schools+ hub aims to address the unequal access to education in the UK and close the attainment gap, affected by socio-economic status. The program works on a model of dual benefit, sending university student volunteers into state schools as tutors and mentors, while allowing them to learn about the issues in the community. One aim is to cultivate a sense of social engagement among students, which will endure past their university years. Another key objective is to foster a love for learning in disadvantaged students. The NGO operates in the south of England.

CamFed is an international NGO, tackling poverty and inequality across Africa by providing girls with emotional and economic support, helping them stay in secondary education. This work led to the creation of CAMA, the CamFed Alumni Association, formed by early beneficiaries of CamFed’s work. It currently comprises 120,000 young women, the largest mechanism of its kind to prove the scalability of CamFed’s grassroot change, spreading and supporting its values.
Many agree that education is a human right, but how can we really make that mean something? EdX has five pillars of Reimagining Education Goals for 2022:

1) education access
2) education quality
3) modular education
4) omnichannel learning
5) lifelong learning

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) connect teachers from leading universities with students across the globe. By doing this, edX also serves as a stepping stone for those in developing countries to enter higher education, making education as a human right a reality. Online learning is not just used to connect distance learners, but is increasingly used on campuses. Whether because some courses are oversubscribed or simply to offer choices to students, the idea of an online campus or hybrid learning is becoming a reality. Students who learn online show significantly lower levels of stress, as they can learn at their own pace and can continue learning at any point in their lives. Online learning is the future.
Getting children and teenagers to study is a particularly hard task. Many feel isolated from or bored by the task of learning. To alter human behaviour, certain methods have proven to work, while others have not. Dr David Halpern spoke about behavioural science and how three main interventions are used to encourage education.

The first is determination, which uses simple online courses to teach children the value of persistence. The second is value affirmations, whereby helping a young person feel more confident in their identity helps them to not regard the prospect of excelling in other domains as a threat to their identity. The third, mobilising support around the young person, has proved extremely effective. When parents are given information about what their child has been doing during their school day, this enables them to engage in a discussion with their children about their work. Studies of how these interactions can impact behaviour have proved this to be extremely effective.
Worldwide Educating For the Future Index (WEFFI) Launch

The Index found some general trends in what made a country successful:

- Wealth is not an all-important factor.
- System reviews are essential amid constant change.
- Teachers must engage in continuous learning so they can cultivate and then teach future skills.
- Diversity and tolerance should be instilled as universal values. Important to develop a global citizen mindset.
- Rigid teaching approaches do not suit future skills learning.

The Worldwide Educating for the Future Index is the first index to assess education inputs rather than outputs. The WEFFI 2018 studied 50 economies (up from 35 in 2017) and ranked them on education input evaluated through three pillars with different weightings.

1) **Policy Environment** (30%), which looks at the government’s role, such as national education strategy and curriculum and assessment frameworks.
2) **Teaching Environment** (50%), which looks at everything in the classroom from the quality of teachers and their salaries to the availability of technological resources and career advice for students.
3) **Socio-economic Environment** (20%), which assesses wider society, diversity, equality, civic and economic freedom, future optimism etc.

The index measures the commitment of governments to develop and promote education that equips youth (15-24 years) with skills for the economic and social demands of tomorrow.
What is assessment for?

Trisha Suresh from the Economist Intelligence Unit, Nunzio Quacquarelli from QS Quacquarelli Symonds and Tim Oates from Cambridge Assessment formed our panel for discussion of the need for assessments.

Trisha Suresh introduced the Worldwide Educating for the Future Index. Nunzio Quacquarelli then introduced the QS University Ranking Index, which ranks universities according to many factors, but with a significant focus on graduate employability, to assess which they engage with thousands of employers. Tim Oates examined assessments of national education systems, such as the transnational surveys, indices and other measurements.

A lively Q&A discussion ensued: Are rankings helpful or unhelpful? Do we focus on the data and score rather than the conclusions they indicate? The consensus seemed to be that rankings have their flaws and limitations; they are probably overly popular with youth and the media and are a simplistic way to look at big issues. However, as long as we focus not just on running a good index and constructing sensitive conclusions from that process, then they do provide insight and a starting point for comparison and change.
Dr Charles Chen Yidan commented:
This Yidan prize conference marks a **historic milestone** bringing the expertise of 150 leading educators and guests together in Cambridge. **Presence and partnership** combine to provide strength to this collaboration. On behalf of the Yidan Prize Foundation, I thank everyone here for making this happen. This is **not a goodbye**, as I hope to see you at the Yidan Prize Summit taking place in Hong Kong. I hope that this conference has rejuvenated your dedication to your work. May all of us look back on this conference as the beginning of our joint project towards making this world a better place through education.
Summary and Conclusions

Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, Former Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, Chair of Cancer Research UK offered some closing remarks

What makes Charles Chen Yidan’s vision special besides him as an individual? It’s his personal commitment to coupling fundamental research with what we learn from looking at practice.

Yidan Prize is not just about the individuals concerned. It’s about how these individuals continue to influence our capacity to deliver a better education for all. The 2018 laureates beautifully exemplify this.

I love the idea of setting standards based on objective data, which you can measure to draw valid conclusions. This is very difficult to do, so I command the important work of Larry Hedges.

I also believe everything Anant has shown us today leads to conclude that technology will help reduce the inequalities we face in providing a better education for all. What you’re doing with edX is little short of brilliant. Increasingly we see a devaluation of teaching as a profession, which means we’re heading for trouble. I can’t think of a more honorable profession than teaching.

We need teachers who have the capacity to educate and the empathy to work with whatever failings a student may have.

Local work of schools with employers is also fundamental to improving educational attainment, so we shouldn’t underestimate the role of employers.

A failure to invest in education is something that is a national and international failure. The capacity to deliver a quality education to all should be a of primary importance.

To achieve this we should adopt technologies, better information and better analysis of data, including paying attention to rankings, but ignoring minutia. This should matter to all of us because what we’re talking about is not the past, but the future.