

BEYOND CLASSROOMS AND MARKER BOARDS;

Rethinking Education to Navigate Future Disruptions

Identifying the disruption Trifecta

When Ifeanyi gained admission into Obafemi Awolowo University—one of Nigeria’s most prestigious universities—in the year 2011, He was not as ecstatic as his immediate family members. As far as he was concerned, he knew what he wanted, and going to university was the exact opposite of that. Having assisted his uncle with running his business in Lagos for the past 2 years, he had had several conversations with fellow youths, and the recurring theme that rang out in those conversations was that university education was not exactly good use of one’s time. Why waste four years reading ‘big big’ books when you can start a business? They often asked rhetorically. The conversation would then continue with the group listing out several businessmen that started businesses early and became millionaires without having to attend the university.

Those conversations left Ifeanyi with a burning desire to start a business. Within a short while, he had identified owning a cyber café as the sort of business he wanted to venture into. This business would involve people coming to his ‘business centre’ and paying an hourly fee for access to high speed internet.

Since going to university felt like Ifeanyi’s money-making plans were put on hold, Ifeanyi grudgingly went through school; finishing with a third class degree in computer science.¹

By 2016, Ifeanyi was done with university, and sought to start his cyber-café business in Lagos. To his dismay, the cyber-café business had lost most of its viability as smartphones and PCs were fast becoming a norm in many Nigerian households. To make matters worse, several network providers were either already providing 4G LTE connectivity to their customers or laying fibre optic cables that would enable them do so.

While the story of Ifeanyi is set in Nigeria, it mirrors the reality of several people; especially youths around the world as to how technological development and innovation has continually led to sudden disruptions across various sectors. Despite, innovation is an important aspect of human development that comes with several advantages, historical antecedents and contemporary realities show us it also comes with some

¹ Third class Degree in Nigeria is equivalent to getting 1.50 – 2.39. over a 5.0 grading system. It is the second lowest attainable grade; higher only than ‘Pass’. 4.50 – 5.0 point (First Class Honours), 3.50 – 4.49 (Second Class Upper), 2.40 – 3.49 (Second Class Lower), 1.50 – 2.39 (Third Class), and 1.00 -1.49 (Pass Degree).

disadvantages.² These disadvantages could come in form of job loss for some people, business closure for others, amongst other effects.

With the rate of innovation and speed of technological advancement in today's world, technology easily qualifies as the apex disruptor capable of introducing drastic changes into our daily affairs.

As far as disruption is concerned, technology does not stand alone; geopolitics is a perfect 'wingman' in this regard; usually heralded by issues like wars, trade wars, immigration amongst several others.³ Citizens of countries like Ukraine, Palestine, Israel, would definitely have had their lives significantly disrupted in recent times owing to the warfare that their countries are caught up in.⁴ In the same vein, businesses and multinational giants might find themselves embroiled in the midst of unexpected trade wars owing to changes in government policies and rivalry between two or more governments. A perfect example of this can be seen from some American and Chinese multinationals like Apple, Huawei, Tesla, BYD, amongst others, that have found themselves adversely affected by the cross-fire of trade sanctions and embargo both countries have engaged in over the past few years.⁵

Sociological evolution is a factor that helps complete the major disruptors trifecta in this essay. The systems responsible for supporting our dreams and aspirations, are underpinned by shared human behaviour and belief systems that undergo changes with time. Quite often, these changes are capable of introducing disruptions. An example of such is the growth of the passion economy⁶ to unprecedented levels.⁷

² Leah Shelene Asaram "Technology Advancements: The Pros and Cons" EIT.edu, October 11 2023, <https://www.eit.edu.au/technology-advancements-the-pros-and-cons/>

³ For instance, youths in many developed countries of the world might find that an increased pressure on their labour markets as a result of increasing immigration from unstable and developing countries, has heightened the difficulty of getting employment opportunities.

⁴ Alasdair Soussi "What do Ukrainian Refugees Make of Israel's War on Gaza?" Al Jazeera, February 2 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/2/ukrainian-refugees-divided-on-israels-war-on-gaza-but-feel-for-civilians>

⁵ Nathan Reiff "The Top 3 Industries Affected by the Trade War With China" Investopedia, June 25 2019, <https://www.investopedia.com/industries-most-likely-to-be-impacted-by-trade-disputes-with-china-in-2019-4580508>

⁶ Utkarsh Amitabh "How the Passion Economy is Shaping the Future of Work" WEFForum February 15 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/02/how-the-passion-economy-is-shaping-the-future-of-work/>

⁷ Other examples of sociological disruptions can be seen in issues surrounding gender and race perception in today's society.

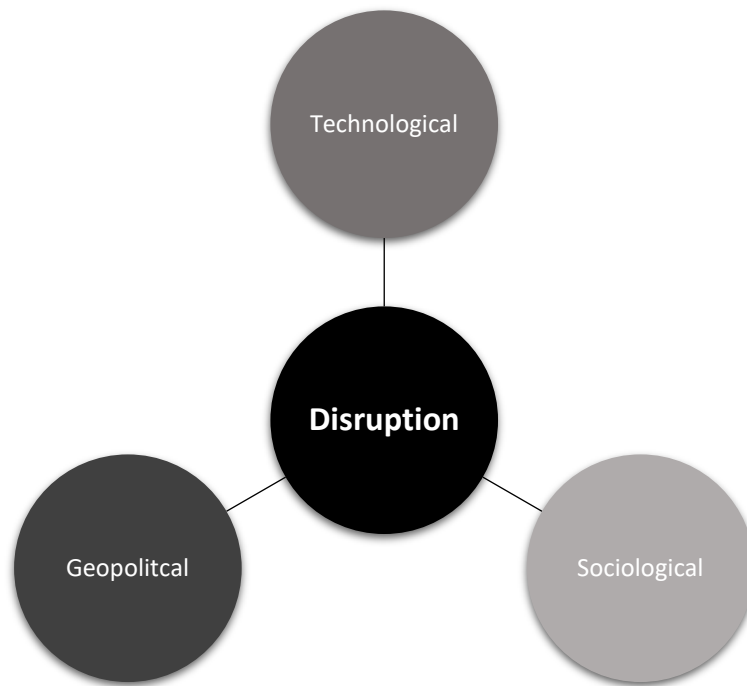


Figure 1: A diagram representing the disruption trifecta⁸

As one might have noticed, the highlighted disruption trifecta do not necessarily bring about disruption in isolation. More often than not, there is an interplay between two or more of the identified factors. For instance, technological advancement in terms of tools for collaboration and communication made remote work possible. However, a geopolitical disruption in form of the Covid-19 accelerated the willingness of employers to adopt this process. To cap it all, findings from research as to how cost-effective and time-efficient remote work can be, relative to on-site working seemed to create a sociological disruption for employers, who are now generally more willing to adopt remote work even after the pandemic.⁹

The nexus between disruption and education is that while we undergo various learning stages to improve our competence and gain expertise, unexpected disruptions are capable of making such education seem futile. This could occur to a degree where people

⁸ Illustration by author.

⁹ Tim Smart "Remote Work Has Radically Changed the Economy – and It's Here to Stay" USNews, January 25 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/economy/articles/2024-01-25/remote-work-has-radically-changed-the-economy-and-its-here-to-stay>

begin to question the relevance of the education they have gotten. For example, one could suddenly find out that a skillset or discipline that they have dedicated so much time to, is suddenly near-redundant owing to a recent technological advancement. Identifying this nexus helps introduce a degree of clarity that will prove important to the subsequent parts of this discourse.

Qualities for Tomorrow's Leaders in a Disruptive World.

In a search for a solution to the fix he had found himself, Ifeanyi sought advice from an high-flying ex-classmate from his university days who was now an IT personnel with one of the biggest telecommunications firms in the country. He narrated his ordeal as to how his hopes of establishing a cyber café was shattered by technological advancements and how he wished he finished with a first class like Yemi. "Perhaps, I would have a good job now, instead of being stranded with my foolish business idea" Ifeanyi bemoaned.

Yemi shook his head and smiled before launching into a mini 'Druckerian' lecture. "The first thing you must realize is that the whole point of education is to help you become a better thinker, and your class of degree is irrelevant in that sense."

"But how do I become a better thinker? The last thinking I did is what got me into this mess."

"You are seeing it wrongly" Yemi replied. "Your very first problem is that you assume your idea was problematic, when in fact, it was a good plan. Your mistake however is that you left no room for changes in your plan. You put all your eggs one basket and left no room for disruptions, which was why you skipped classes, and failed to put in maximum effort for exams. You were so sure of your plan that you failed to be flexible, and that is why you are here today."

Ifeanyi sighed. Everything Yemi was saying was true.

"See, in a world riddled with technological, geopolitical and sociological disruptions, flexibility must be found in anyone that would be capable of navigating through the sudden changes brought about by such disruptions. Think of these disruptions as a

sudden gale and yourself as a tree; the more flexible you are, the higher your chances of surviving the storm is.”

“As to you becoming a better thinker, you need to start thinking like a leader.” Yemi added.

“A leader?” Ifeanyi scoffed. “I am not leading anybody, neither am I holding any leadership position.”

“Another mistake” Yemi interjected. “Leadership has nothing to do with rank, or status, just as Leadership and management expert Peter Drucker, confirmed.¹⁰ Besides, you must realise that you are leading yourself, and leading yourself is a prerequisite to leading others effectively.”

“I understand you, but I am quite confused as to how thinking like a leader would help me think better especially in the context of disruptions.” Ifeanyi queried.

“Okay. Let me ask you a question. what will you do as a leader of an organization knowing that disruptions are inevitable and the life of several people can be made or marred by your own decision? Will you close down the business?”

“Of course not. I will try to know what the disruption is, and put measures in place to mitigate its effect.”

“That is close enough even though your answer reflects your negative bias towards disruptions. Before coming to that, I will tell you what Drucker thinks about change or if you like; disruptions. He believes that the best way to manage change is to create it.¹¹ As valid as Drucker’s opinion is, reality teaches that we cannot always be the herald of change, meaning that we have to innovate through it at times.” Yemi paused then continued.

“However for you to innovate through disruptions you must first innovate your perception of disruptions, such that rather than thinking of mitigating the effect of

¹⁰ Drucker P.F (1996) “Not Enough Generals Were Killed”, Foreword in The Leader of the Future, The Drucker Foundation.

¹¹ Jenny Darroch “How to Manage Through Change, the Drucker Way: Where are the Change Leaders?” Huffpost, June 2 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-to-manage-through-change-the-drucker-way-where_b_5930f752e4b0649fff2117cb

disruptions, you choose to maximize disruptions to your advantage. Such mentality encourages you to innovate in times of disruption, and innovation in turn helps you turn disruption into an ally.”

“I think it is easy for you to always see the positive side of things when you have a safe, nice job that pays you well” Ifeanyi countered

Yemi giggled “nice? Yes. Well-paying? True. But safe? I don’t think so. Okay. What if I told you that I am about taking up professional courses in the area of cybersecurity?”

“But why? Are you in danger of losing your present job?” Ifeanyi asked; visible shock on his face.

“Not exactly, but you know how working in the private sector can be” Yemi calmly answered. “However, my company has faced severe cybersecurity attacks in recent months. One of those attacks led to a breach of customer data; costing us about 50 million in damages. Mind you, that was because we chose to settle out of court; it could have been way worse if we didn’t.”

“So to put it simply, you are seeing a potential opportunity in the midst of your company’s problems” Yemi chipped in.

“Exactly. It shows what I have always believed about you, you are a fast learner, and that is exactly what you need to develop foresight—another key character that helps with disruptions.” The advantage of foresight is such that it reduces the difficulty of predicting the future. As with my personal example, your foresight could be informed by an emerging problem in your environment. In other contexts one might adopt Jeff Bezos’ thought process which hammers on focusing on things that would not change rather than trying so hard to predict what will change. In explaining the quite profound paradox, Bezos points out that certain things like humans’ desire for comfort, speed, and increased efficiency will never change, as such changes that accelerates the actualisation of these desires are always bound to come. Essentially he proves that by focusing on the unchanging aspects of human desires, we can tell the direction to expect successful disruptions from.”¹²

¹² Julia Kirby and Thomas A. Stewart “The Institutional Yes” Harvard Business Review, October 2007, <https://hbr.org/2007/10/the-institutional-yes>

“Lastly, note that as important as flexibility, innovation, and foresight are to navigating disruptions, action is king. Drucker once said leaders are those who do the right things.¹³ Essentially, knowing what to do in times of disruption is not enough, one must actually do what needs to be done. Yemi added with an air of finality.

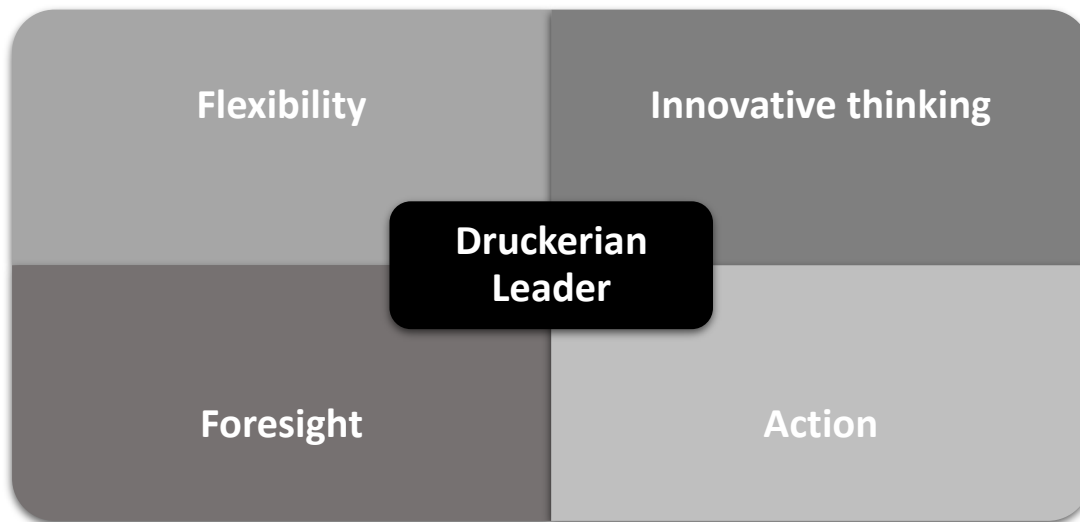


Figure 2: A diagrammatic summary of the traits of a 'Druckerian' leader of tomorrow.¹⁴

OF LIGHTING FIRES AND FILLING BUCKETS; AN INTERNALIZED APPROACH TO LEARNING;

By the time Ifeanyi left Yemi, a fire was kindled in his heart and he began to look up materials and books on leadership and the future trends in technology. He carefully pondered on the conversation and began to internalize it; adopting it in gauging every new information he found. Soon, he had his 'eureka moment' and a business idea was born. In his research, Ifeanyi found out that Nigeria was becoming a hub for tech start-ups who usually had to bootstrap their way through their early years; facing cost-related difficulties with regards to purchasing office spaces and equipment. To alleviate this problem, Ifeanyi thought of an advanced version of his cyber café idea which catered to tech start-ups and intending founders. Thus, Ifeanyi developed the idea of what is now known as co-working spaces and began leasing them out to new tech start-ups.

¹³ Peter F Drucker (1975) "The Practice of Management" Allied Publishers.

¹⁴ Illustration by author.

As the saying goes, education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.¹⁵ Like Ifeanyi, his conversation with Yemi was some sort of education which Ifeanyi internalised to produce astounding results. Sadly, many individuals today approach learning like an external process that is meant to fill up our emptiness, rather than spark our curiosity. The results of this is an expectation to be spoon-fed with all of the exact ideas and information needed to navigate through life. In reality, what we learn should be treated as data, which our internal synthesis should convert into actionable insights that are adaptable to several contexts.

As such, youths need to understand that the point of education is to develop our mind to apply knowledge and develop better ideas, rather than be a pseudo-robot that does only what we have been told without reasoning for ourselves.

Buoyed by his success about five years after into his co-working space business, Ifeanyi expanded to Kenya and South Africa. Upon noticing the impressive success rates of the start-ups, Ifeanyi reached out to Yemi and other well-to-do friends to establish a venture capital firm. This move enabled them leverage their advantage of proximity to new start-ups brimming with potential and in need of funds, and thus continued the meteoric rise of Ifeanyi.

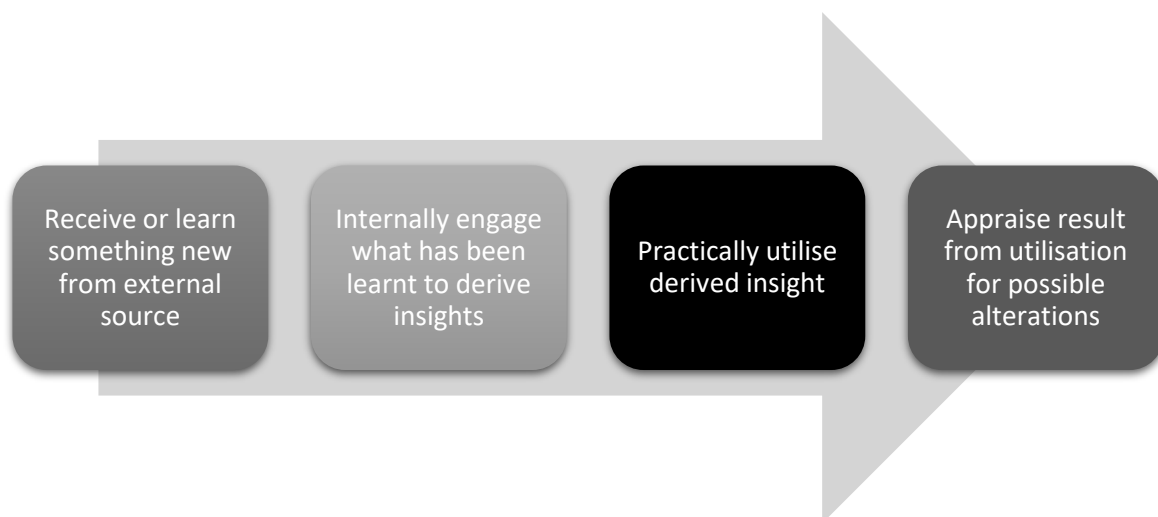


Figure 3: A diagram showing the ideal learning process¹⁶

¹⁵ Plutarch – Greek Philosopher.

¹⁶ Illustration by author.

Education: Assessing The Present, Creating the Future

Despite the heavy criticisms levelled against the present educational system, it contributes it quota to helping navigate life's turbulence in at least three ways.

First, the present system places emphasis on the need for excellence and diligence, especially through the special recognition that it grants to people found to have exhibited those traits. Such practices usually compel people who pass through it to imbibe these two traits that are necessary for navigating any sphere of life.

Second, the present system helps to create connections and interactions that could prove useful for life's experiences. Ifeanyi's turning point coming from a conversation he had with a course mate from school lends credence to this.

At a general level, the present system helps to broaden the horizon of the average person due to increased exposure to information that transcends geographic limitations, thereby laying a foundation for improved insights into various issues.

An in-depth understanding of the present system shows that most of the flaws associated with it manifest at an institutional level. Put simply, such problems emanate either from the institutions of learning or the teachers themselves. Hence, given observed realities, three major things need to change for our present educational systems to better prepare youths for disruptions.

The first is that the system must evolve beyond one that mostly tests students on their ability to regurgitate what has been learnt into a more practical one. Drucker himself aligned with this by submitting that practical education must be adopted in an age of innovation.¹⁷ A way of achieving this is by creating tests and exams that compels students to apply what has been learnt to real world issues in their respective disciplines. This forces creative thinking and unearths the internalised aspect of learning, rather than the standard garbage-in-garbage-out approach.

Secondly, there is need for a system that encourages a broader scope of education. Presently, the system appears to support a more niched or specific focus in learning, almost to the point where multipotentialites¹⁸ are made to feel unserious or like

¹⁷ Peter F. Drucker. "Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the New", p.129, Transaction Publishers. 2011

¹⁸ People possessing many interests and/or creative pursuits

individuals lacking focus.¹⁹ In an increasingly disruptive world, such inclination must change to give room for exploration and nurturing multiple talents and abilities. One obvious area this must be adopted outside of school is internships, where students who are still figuring out their areas of interest should be rotated across departments, rather than judged as being unserious for not picking an area of interest yet. Introducing such would help individuals develop a broader skillset, which will inadvertently reflect positively on their capacity for handling disruptions. Also, exploring various niches would generally help enhance the clarity of individuals for decision-making and expand the perspectives they see things from.

The final major change is that students should be given the opportunity to express independent thoughts even if it runs against expert opinion, as it helps them become better thinkers. Beyond that, such system is likelier to birth innovation owing to the development of a mentality that depends less on convention for validity. Succinctly put, ‘that is how it has always been done’ should cease to be an authoritative validation of an idea being taught within the system.

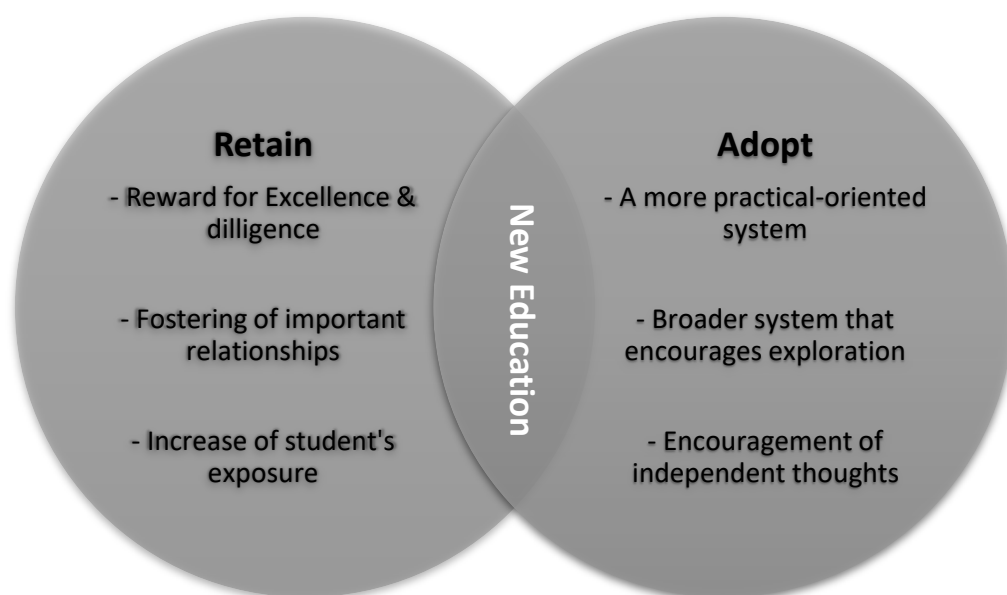


Figure 4: A summary of what should be retained and changed to create a proper educational system²⁰

¹⁹ Robert Halfon MP “Our Education System is Too Narrow and Doesn’t Give Young People the Skills they need for Work and Life” Rethinking Assessment, May 14 2021, <https://rethinkingassessment.com/rethinking-blogs/our-education-system-is-too-narrow-and-doesnt-give-young-people-the-skills-they-need-for-work-and-life/>

²⁰ Illustration by author.

Bridging The Access Gap : A Task of Joint Engineering

The importance of education in dealing with disruption makes it non-negotiable for everyone. Bridging the existing gap of access to education requires a unified effort from both governments and individuals around the world.

At the government end, education should be recognised as a fundamental human right, contrary to the status quo in many nations, where education is a non-justiciable right.²¹ To this end, legislations should mandate affordable education from the government end, based on the prevailing standards of living in each nation. After all, the affordability of education is still the best way to ensure that it is accessible to all. Also, legislations around informal education systems could be adopted to reduce the potential exploitation in such system and lend further credence to informal education.²²

For individuals, a suggested initiative is an online 'global school' built on volunteering.²³ Here, tutors with varying proficiencies would come together to create definite learning structures and leverage video-sharing platforms to teach interested people various subjects and skills. Willing donors could also help providing stipends to assist interested indigent learners with data subscription. At the end of each learning period, practically-inclined tests would be taken and certificates would be issued to students.

Concluding Remarks

"A shift is coming" would be a valid statement to close this essay. Yet a decade or more from now, the same statement would remain valid due to the constancy of change and its concomitant disruptions. Knowing that the only way to survive or maximise shifts is either by shifting before it comes, or shifting in line with the shift, it is high time our

²¹ This means the right cannot be enforced in courts of law. Examples of countries where this happens are Nigeria, USA, and so on. See more on this here; Fons Coomans 'Justiciability of the Right to Education' Erasmus Law Review, Volume 2, ISSUE 04. 2009

²² This includes initiatives like apprenticeship.

²³ This initiative needs not be global; it could as well be established in various countries by interested individuals.

educational system experienced positive shifts, if it is to remain relevant in preparing us for disruptions.