

# Majority World Theological Education: Global Implications

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In much of the majority world, instability is a persisting reality. This instability affects your work. Scholar Leaders International seeks to explore this reality and its effects on the future of theological education—in your local situation and globally. We have two particular, interconnected interests:

*Part 1--Information:* To what extent are outsider lists of factors that lead to instability a reality in your region? What factors are present in your regions that are not on the lists? What has been your most effective response to these factors—something that you believe holds most promise for future development of your theological school?

*Part 2--Innovation:* In particular, does the persisting reality of instability point to new and, perhaps, unexpected developments in theological education—locally and globally?

## Part 1: Information

Following is a list of factors compiled by individuals and research agencies. Select with your cursor those that are true in your situation.

Institutions built with western money are threatened because much western money is now allocated to evangelistic projects and church planting. Jack Robinson, working with West African seminary leaders, has observed that large, expensive campuses are a thing of the past.

Missionaries are leaving or changing roles (where once they were 'free' faculty).

Conventional curriculum is perceived to be contextually inadequate—it doesn't serve the needs and/or culture of our region.

Some schools are in the midst of war, unrest, or other threats to safety and survival (with consequences for enrollment).

The placing of national leaders in administrative positions is, on the one hand, a good thing, but many leaders say they have little to no background in higher education administration and have not been prepared for such roles.

Faculty are often part time or less because they have to work at jobs that will pay a living wage.

Student composition is changing. Fewer adult learners are residential. Faculty are increasingly increasingly challenged by unpredictable learners with unconventional scheduling needs.

Western style tuition models are "maxed out". Schools cannot continue to raise tuition as a financial survival strategy.

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Other challenges were revealed through investigative visits sponsored by Overseas Council. Through 2011-2012, Dr. Meri MacLeod interviewed leaders and students in nine majority world schools in as many countries. They identified specific needs that clustered in the following areas. Please check those that are relevant to your situation:

Need for alternative revenue sources

Leadership succession

Contextual program development

Adult learning and curriculum design

Accreditation (first time application or pending site visit)

What factors are present in your regions that are not on the above lists? Please describe them below:

What has been your most effective response to these factors—something that you believe holds most promise for future development of your theological school? Please describe this response below:

Your Name:

Please save this document to your computer and then send as an email attachment to [erhunter@scholarleaders.org](mailto:erhunter@scholarleaders.org)



## Part 2: Innovation

Information is relatively useless without an underlying inquiry and way to assess it. We want to inquire further into the link between instability and innovation—and we invite your perspective and ideas.

Fundamentally, we accept that instability at multiple levels is a persisting reality in most parts of the world; and theological institutions worldwide confront multiple threats—in some situations, life threatening. It is unlikely that schools confronting serious and *persisting* threats will be able to address effectively enrollment decline, program sustainability, financial stressors, and other issues through conventional program and administrative practices.

Three areas seem to have dominated discussions about innovation in theological education in the majority world—and increasingly in North America.

- *Innovative Financial Solutions.* Particular challenges are identified, alternatives underway described, and fundamental issues addressed (e.g., tuition-based funding is maxed out, donor-based and/or western funding is diminishing or changing emphasis, denominations and large churches with significant financial resources are less willing to fund seminaries, facility maintenance costs are becoming overwhelming).
- *Innovative Instructional Design Solutions.* Implications of the shift from teaching to learning, from a static programmed curriculum to an integrated design, are considered.
- *Innovative Higher Education Leadership and/or Faculty Development Solutions.* Ideas are shared related to the hiring and formation of new faculty, the professional development of existing faculty and staff, and the support of upper level administrative leaders who may not possess adequate understanding of responsibilities and practices in higher education administration.

An inquiry that asks leaders to identify key instability factors, and then to work together (perhaps as a consortium) around three (or more) key areas that require innovative thinking may be a productive effort. However, since curricular, financial, instructional, and administrative models were borrowed or adapted from the west; and since those models were established and functioned in a climate of relative stability, it might be more productive to explore the underlying reality of instability. Today, even as discussion proceeds about the need for innovation, characteristics of conventional models persist in majority world schools. When stability disrupts theological schools at multiple levels, leaders seem to invest considerable time and energy in efforts to return to those stable models. However, what if we recognized *instability as the new norm*.

Organizations that seek stability emphasize excellence in structure and outcomes, develop charts to show (static) roles and lines of authority, focus on departments rather than the whole, and practice top-down communication and information gathering. Ultimately, static organizations, especially if they exist in unstable environments, will fail.

Today, it is not uncommon for organizations to accept that they work in a climate of instability—if not chaos, and must develop ways to succeed in that climate.

Click the video clip for a brief description of Margaret Wheatley's perspective on what it takes to function in unsettled times. (Right click for full screen, esc to exit.)

Complex organizations (and there are few more complex than higher education institutions) will be more effective if they view themselves as ecosystems, rather than as production lines or factories. In general, organizations that function more like ecosystems, demonstrate certain behaviors: they are always gathering and analyzing data (see “big data” below); they foster effective relationships across the system; empowerment is demonstrated through shared decision-making and freedom to share ideas; information sharing is encouraged freely and up and down the organization; continuous improvement is a priority for all participants; strong core values unite the organization beyond the use of slogans; leaders manage for opportunity rather than scarcity (e.g., hoarding resources, persistent budget cutting).



### Innovation in Higher Education

Noting that “innovation” is the new watchword in North American higher education, Ann Kirschner is skeptical about the capacity of universities to change—“when observed from the 20,000-foot level, the basic building blocks of higher education—its priorities, governance, instructional design, and cost structure—have hardly budged.”<sup>1</sup> However, whether forced upon organizations, or willingly embraced, change happens. In some cases, it means the end of the organization; in other instances, the organization rebounds with new vitality and effectiveness. And even Kirschner includes Christensen and Eyring’s statement that “higher education is next in line for transformation.”

One would think that higher education is well suited to qualities such as collective intelligence, flexible roles, emphasis of ideas over structure, diversity, problem solving (that accepts mutual dialogue and difference of perspective), creative thinking, corporate research and learning, tolerance of failure, a disposition to serve, and so on. The reality is that many higher education institutions are fragmented (“siloe”), governed by narrow professional interests, and worried about their survival.

Steven Johnson observes that, “chance favors the connected mind”.<sup>2</sup> It is apparent that we are in a period where *international*, *interconnected* visioning is possible; and where, with the inspiration of the Spirit of God, ideas are set free—doors are opened to possibility. Click the video for Johnson’s perspective on “where good ideas come from”.

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<sup>1</sup> Go to <http://chronicle.com/article/Innovations-in-Higher/131424/?sid>

<sup>2</sup> Steven Johnson. *Where Good Ideas Come From*. (New York, NY: Riverhead-Penguin Books, 2011).  
Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugRZGDbPFU>

**So, let's return to our primary inquiry:  
What implications would follow if we  
accepted instability as the new norm?  
Or, put more positively, what would  
theological schools look like that are  
characterized by fluidity and a capacity  
to adapt at every level?**



### A New Fluidity in Theological Schools

After visits to three majority world regions in 2013, Aleshire advised schools *not* to look to the west for their models.<sup>3</sup> Innovation seems to be catching on! The following factors are among those affected if instability is the new norm and fluidity the new response. If you were rethinking these areas in your theological school, what ideas would you suggest?

1. Charles Handy<sup>4</sup> describes successful organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as characterized by service—to individuals and to society. Theological schools have long described themselves as serving organizations. However, the description could be simple rhetoric where service is overwhelmed by fragmentation of instruction, distracting preoccupation with enrollment and finances, a controlling administrative structure, and tenure practices that tend not to emphasize service. If instability is the new norm, fluidity the new response—and if service is a defining characteristic, what changes? Handy asserts that a shift in organizational purpose from production to service requires a shift from rigid structures, managing, and controlling, to networking<sup>5</sup> and responsibility.<sup>6</sup>
2. Every curriculum has an organizing principle. Conventional curriculum is organized around disciplines and courses that are considered important to understanding those disciplines. Would a curriculum organized around problems that affect the church and society be more flexible, responsive, and effective in terms of the development of abilities and knowledge? Perhaps. Note that problems tend to be defined by those who have a stake in their solution; and without care in articulating problems or projects another sort of power structure could be created.<sup>7</sup> Would a curriculum organized around service, or missiology, or spiritual practices, or congregational issues, or significant questions, be more likely to . . .

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<sup>3</sup> From a personal conversation August 29, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Go to <http://www.strategy-business.com/article/03309?pg=all> for information about Charles Handy.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://greghenson.com/blog/2014/10/19/theological-education-as-a-platform/> for a description of one among many illustrations of networking in theological education.

<sup>6</sup> This story arrived in my inbox recently. <http://etale.org/main/2015/08/03/professor-leaves-academia-to-start-a-new-game-changing-kind-of-college/>

<sup>7</sup> Go to [http://bie.org/?gclid=Cj0KEQjwolitBRDTgeiZq93F2LQBEiQAMfXL0VZFgy4CX05K3CsAPowua0wlbUTup\\_sKnr7Tu\\_luYYKlaAtVR8P8HAQ](http://bie.org/?gclid=Cj0KEQjwolitBRDTgeiZq93F2LQBEiQAMfXL0VZFgy4CX05K3CsAPowua0wlbUTup_sKnr7Tu_luYYKlaAtVR8P8HAQ) for more information on problem or project based learning.

3. While not a new concept, experiments in competency-based higher education are currently sanctioned by the US Department of Education.<sup>8</sup> Should programs be based on the development and evaluation of competency? Leaders of some denominations are pressing for this change. However, faculty and others need to be clear about what is driving the definition of competency and its scope. Further, artifacts such as courses are not as necessary in such models. Competency is developed in all manner of ways. In reality, responsible determination of areas of competency, *evaluation* of competency, and determination of *learning experiences* to improve competency is of greater importance than courses. Alverno College, founded over 100 years ago, has become one of North America's premier private colleges. They demonstrate unusual faculty and student commitment to learning experiences that flow from eight well-grounded "abilities".<sup>9</sup>
4. The desire for a credential is understandable. In some instances a particular credential is required by employers; and in some cultures it is a way to get out of undesirable social situations. But the desire for a credential has long hindered innovation in curriculum and programming—mostly due to the presumption that a particular form of credentialing and schooling are inextricably linked. Could we think of this issue differently—more flexibly? Kirschner observes that, "Running like a vein of gold through much of the recent writing on change in higher education is the comforting theme that universities are more important than ever, since society needs educated citizens more than ever. Only we can issue an accredited degree, the precious entry ticket to the knowledge economy." But she also notes that this presumed advantage is likely to be short-lived. A diploma is symbolic and is worth only what the recipients and their employers believe it to be worth. Kirschner predicts that, "The ultimate threat to universities could come from the disaggregation of the degree, as students take advantage of the growing availability of open-source learning networks to present evidence of competency to prospective employers. It is already true that more than one-third of college students attend multiple colleges, cobbling together credits from various places. . . ."<sup>10</sup> When a theological school confers a degree, it is presumed that the student has met "all requirements for the degree." However, the list of requirements may not reflect what is truly required. As a culture of attainment shifts to a culture of learning and service, degrees and other conventional credentials may give way to equally acceptable alternatives.
5. To what extent should theological schools become brokers—of knowledge, of talent, of influence? In more fluid systems, participants can move much more freely among responsibilities. Students can be viewed as part of the process as they navigate among clusters of experiences that build knowledge, ability, and

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<sup>8</sup> Go to <http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning> for information on this trend (one of *many* sites).

<sup>9</sup> Go to <http://www.alverno.edu/academics/ouruniquecurriculum/the8coreabilities/> for information about their approach.

<sup>10</sup> Go to <http://chronicle.com/article/Innovations-in-Higher/131424/?sid>

character. Students could more easily engage in work that allows them to earn an income that pays back the school. Handy's metaphor for the emerging organization is the Shamrock—an organization with a central core of professionals and resource people who serve as consultants to multiple agencies; with specialists (different from the typical adjunct arrangement) at the edges, in the field, bridging feedback between society and the school.

6. The time may come when theological schools have to pay attention to “big data”. Big Data is a term used to describe the massive and various amounts of data streaming in from multiple sources—globally. An organization can't hope to analyze floods of data by traditional means. All too often an institution will gather information from multiple sources, store it in closets . . . Sorry, I mean we create manuals and reports—and then store them in closets. Data are only important if used effectively. Consequently, a growth industry in analytics is emerging. Click on the video for more background in this issue.

Stakeholders in theological schools in times of instability seek to discern emerging patterns, create flexible structures, processes, and relationships—personal and organizational. They constantly innovate—or at least they foster an environment conducive to continual improvement around a core of values that is more than a slogan. In the 1960s and '70s, when the credit card industry was in chaos, Dee Hock imagined an alternative. He founded what became Visa credit card system on the basis of one question: “If there were no constraints, if anything in the world were possible, how would we reimagine the transfer of money?” His answer was to create a global system and a unique organizational structure.<sup>11</sup>



What is your question concerning the future of theological education in your local region and globally? What are you already doing to answer your question?



This document was prepared for ScholarLeaders International. You are welcome to distribute it to majority world leaders in order to elicit feedback that they will send to Evan Hunter at [erhunter@scholarleaders.org](mailto:erhunter@scholarleaders.org)

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<sup>11</sup>Dee Hock. *One From Many: VISA and the Rise of Chaordic Organization*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2005