

**EMPOWER expert pool:
Policy and strategy
development**

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**Innovative
impact**

The unbundling of higher education challenges many traditional assumptions and practices by opening up new business models, expanding conventional delivery modes, promoting new learning designs, and outsourcing student support services, to name a few. However, the movement needs to be understood as problematic as unbundling is not neutral or on an independent trajectory.

The key lesson is that policy-makers and institutional leaders need to understand the bigger picture of the powerful change forces seeking to re-bundle higher education for particular ends. It is essential that we promote greater debate and public awareness of the choices we face both at the national, regional and institution levels in the context of our preferred education futures and social imaginaries of the good society.

Unbundling examples

[*Straighterline*](#) - an example of 'the clock' being rebundled in the U.S. by allowing students to complete their degree online through over 100 accredited colleges with flexible start and stop times.

A critical guide for policy-makers on the great unbundling of higher education

Introduction

This paper provides a critical guide and helicopter view on the growth of the unbundling movement in higher education. It briefly explains the basic concept of unbundling but then illustrates how the movement is far more complex than typically portrayed in popular texts. The position taken is that unbundling is not neutral but rather imbued in economic, political and ideological language. It has many different faces, simultaneously both good and bad, which requires policy-makers and institutional leaders to view the phenomenon through a critical multi-dimensional lens.

Unbundling explained

In 2003, Apple Computer Inc. unbundled the CD with the launch of iTunes. For the first time people could purchase the music they wanted rather than the bundle pre-packaged by the record labels. More recently, in 2010 Uber fundamentally challenged the traditional business model of taxi companies by breaking down the service through dynamic prices and the use of private drivers.

These two high profile examples are often used to explain the basic concept of unbundling in the context of higher education. Put simply, the traditional degree is higher education's version of the bundle (Craig & Williams, 2015). As Craig (2015) points out, bundling has been central to the higher education business model for centuries. Institutions combine content and a wide range of products and services into a qualification package, which generates revenue.

In brief, the unbundling movement in higher education is about efforts to break apart and reconceptualise many of the traditional products and services offered by universities and institutions of higher learning. There is no question that unbundling is one of the really big issues facing governments, policy-makers and institutional leaders as it potentially challenges many traditional assumptions and taken-for-granted practices in higher education (Brown, 2016a).

[Global Freshman Academy](#) – an example of how the 'delivery mode' is being rebundled in the U.S. as learners can earn credits for MOOCs for their first year of study through Arizona State University on the EdX platform. This partnership helps to challenge traditional conceptions of credit hours and what constitutes the first year.

[The MIT Micro Masters](#) – an example of how 'the credential' is being rebundled by an elite institution in the United States as learners from around the world can complete a fully online mini programme of study which after a proctored exam then allows them to apply for an accelerated on-campus MIT masters degree.

[BC Campus Open Ed](#) – an example of how traditional 'content' is being rebundled through the adoption of open educational textbooks. This Canadian initiative helps to infuse digital resources into the curriculum whilst saving students significant money.

[Epigeum](#) – an example of the rebundling of traditional professional development for academic staff through global collaboration.

[Tutor.com](#) – an example of how traditional 'student services' are being rebundled by a commercial online supplier to help extend hours and increase the range and quality of solutions available to learners.

Many different faces

The unbundling movement in higher education has many different faces and is far more complex than typically portrayed through popular examples (i.e., Apple & Umber) or in descriptions of the rise the MOOC.

In many respects the current language of disruption, democratisation and re-imagination in the age of unbundling requires a type of double vision combining both political and pedagogical perspectives. The debate is more nuanced than simple dichotomies of good or bad, as the language of unbundling is entangled in a number of interwoven and contradictory arguments.

On the one hand, unbundling provides a real opportunity to reduce costs, enhance quality and address increasing global demand for higher education. As many educators observe, it will not be possible to satisfy the rising demand for higher education, especially in developing countries, by relying on traditional models. Thus there is a moral imperative for exploring the potential of new unbundled models of higher education, including public-private partnerships, adoption of open educational resources, outsourcing of student support services, and so on.

On the other hand, arguably, unbundling has its roots in the contested terrain of globalisation, neo-liberalism and the decline of influence of the small nation-state. Put another way, many of the drivers for unbundling promote *laissez-faire* principles of individual freedom, education as a personal commodity, and the ultimate goal of an unrestricted global market for higher education (Brown, 2016a).

The key point is that unbundling is not on an independent trajectory, but rather entwined within a complex constellation of social, technological and educational change. Accordingly, the challenge for policy-makers is to steer a path between the language of opportunity, firmly anchored in a re-conceptualist mission of promoting wider access to life-long learning through new unbundled models of higher education, set against the need for a deeper level of critique.

The bigger picture

Taking a look at the bigger picture two grand narratives can be seen as underlying the unbundling movement: the tradition of the Learning Society and the growing influence of the Knowledge Economy.

References

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Resources

[The unbundled university](#)

[Unbundling education: Mapping the changing nature of higher education in South Africa](#)

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Although overly simplistic, and not mutually exclusive, the former views education as a public good, with the goal of more equitable, inclusive and socially just futures for all. In contrast, the latter perspective treats higher education as an individual commodity through which a competitive global market can help to increase quality, reduce costs and establish a larger pool of 'high-tech' workers capable of keeping countries and major economies competitive (Brown, 2016b).

While on the surface the language of 'unbundling' promotes democracy, opening access and new learning pathways in the traditional of life-long learning, many initiatives actually end up re-bundling higher education to support the goals of deregulation and the free market. For example, the move to introduce digital badges and nano-degrees appears to challenge the protected status of traditional university-level qualifications. A more agile "just-in-time" and "just enough" education is emerging in response to what we are told is growing demand from learners (consumers) and employers (customers). However, the growth of such bite size courses from a metaphorical supermarket shelf of offerings where learners collect digital badges (coupons) along the way is arguably an example of how neo-liberal principles, disguised in hegemonic language, infuses the unbundling movement.

It follows that the concept of hegemony—in which dominant groups in society seek to establish the common sense, define what counts as legitimate areas of agreement and disagreement, and shape the political agendas made public and discussed as possible—is central to understanding the unbundling movement within the bigger picture of educational reform. Put more simply, it is fair to say that a strong Knowledge Economy discourse is imbued in the dominant languages of persuasion promoting unbundling in higher education. The risk is that policy-makers and institutional leaders seeking to re-imagine higher education in the tradition of the Learning Society may end up collaborating with the enemy.

Conclusion

The unbundling movement should not be viewed as a single or monolithic entity, as it has many different faces. Nevertheless, unbundling is not on an independent trajectory and cannot be uncoupled from wider debates over issues of power and the struggle over who will win control of the higher education system. The key point ifor policy-makers is to reframe the current debate away from unbundling *per se* and rather locate discussions about the movement in bigger ideas, broader social imaginaries and our preferred education futures.