

Disrupting the Traditional Global Education System

Mike Feerick's speech at the WISE conference



Mike Feerick
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Education Disrupted, Education Reimagined was the theme of this year's World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) virtual conference held in June 2020. The following is an excerpt from the address delivered at the conference by guest speaker Mike Feerick:

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"The education system is in crisis. Covid-19 isn't the cause, it was already in crisis. The fact is that 93% of people have never been to college and so we need an education system that is far more accessible. We need to educate everybody and we need to educate them now. The systems that are there are just too slow, too expensive, and they can't reach everyone.

"I believe that the current system is overdue for disruption. I also believe in the promise of what's possible, which has been brought about by technology and the fact that people are actually willing to use technology. Because while technology may change, behaviour often lags behind.

"It's possible to put all knowledge and skills training online for free. Alison has nearly 16 million learners, 3 million graduates, and about 2,000 free courses. We're not just talking about it, we're doing. Anyone can go onto Alison and study for free. It's a working model, going for thirteen years. We've proven it – you can create a scalable, sustainable platform for free education.

"But it's not just about free education. We're also in the publishing business. Many people don't realise that on the Alison platform there's a whole publishing universe where people learn how to use our publishing tool for free. They can then publish in any language, on any subject, at any level, and get their content out to anyone worldwide. So we have a situation now in which technology is allowing us to present knowledge for free to learners, and also to give everybody the tools and the training to publish knowledge for free. We have reached a world where everyone can be a teacher, and everyone a learner.

"We're trying to create a world where there's a free flow of knowledge and skills training. We're trying to drive all costs of education down to zero. And we're succeeding. And how we're doing it is to

scale the platform. We only have to make cents from every individual who comes on the website, through advertising, to pay our bills.

“We’re disrupting an education business worth \$4 trillion. We’re driving costs to zero so, hopefully, we can reduce the education of adults down to a business that’s in the billions, not in the trillions. This releases an enormous amount of money that would be available for other important things.

“Now if you can learn anything anywhere you can be tested on anything anywhere. I’ve said that 93% of the world has never been to college. So how do we assess how smart they are? A lot of companies around the world talk about skill shortages and why wouldn’t there be when they are only hiring college graduates who make up 7% of the world? How then do we assess how smart people are around the world? The truth is that we can do this.

“In the US in particular, there’s a lot of companies that are no longer looking to formal education when it comes to hiring people. They’re setting them tests – personality tests, cognitive skills tests, testing their verbal reasoning, numeracy reasoning, abstract reasoning. These tests have always been expensive but the truth is they can be free. We’ve launched a free personality test on Alison and we’ll have free cognitive skills tests online later this year.

“What this enables the world to do is for everyone to be able to find out how smart they are in various different ways and to be able to present this information to an employer.

“Self-knowledge is key because there’s an enormous amount of people around the world being told they’re not smart unless they’ve paid a college an awful lot of money and received a piece of paper. But we all know this isn’t true. So how do we bring these people into play? We can identify what their strengths and weaknesses are and develop them. We can assess just how smart they are via these tests and in that way make them available for potential hiring and development online. It allows the whole world to engage.

“And then on the other side, what we can do is go to the employers. Most employers hire in a very lazy way. They put out a short job description and description of the person they want to hire. And they go from there. But actually they can do a lot better. Through our system, they could ask a lot more questions and at the same time, open up their hiring to the world.

“I believe that there’s a change coming in education and training that is going to be a tsunami. The example I often come back to is that, in 1900, the motor car was just invented and made up only 5% of transport in the US. By 1920, only 5% was not motorised and the entire carriage industry was gone. You’re going to see the same thing in education because the technology is here, the systems are free, and people need them.”
