# Populism and Higher Education Curriculum Development: Problem Based Learning as a Mitigating Response

*Edited by* Romeo V. Turcan · John E. Reilly



#### Populism and Higher Education Curriculum Development: Problem Based Learning as a Mitigating Response

"Writing in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic it is arresting to read a book that identifies the challenge of a totally different type of pandemic - populism and the threat which it poses to the academic world. As the authors say, 'it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the majority of graduates may be as vulnerable to populist rhetoric as nongraduates precisely because they are not engaged in a process of consciousness raising through their curriculum'. This represents a grave indictment of Higher Education to which the book offers insights from a variety of perspectives arguing that the curriculum and the learning process need to respond in a vigorous way engaging both teacher and learner with the flood of 'isms'. This view is echoed by European Rectors in their Vienna Declaration that there is an urgent need to combat manifestations of populism and 'strive to prevent and work against': 'post-truth explanations - increasing inequalities, nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, intolerance, polarisation, and radicalisation as well as pseudo-science and pseudo-facts and other threats to democratic and scientific culture'. Problem Based Learning may not be the total antidote but if it is rigorous it does instill a recognition that all evidence needs to be interrogated systematically and thoroughly and that solutions to complex problems can rarely be encapsulated by simple slogans. This is a timely, thought provoking book precisely because it is searching for a type of academic vaccine to the undermining threats of populism, which will require wholehearted engagement to achieve."

#### -Ilan Alon, Professor, University of Agder, Norway

"In the post-truth and populism era, this book takes current controversial topics, including BREXIT, globalization and the counter forces of nationalism and protectionism, sustainable development, the impact of Artificial Intelligence – and asks whether a genuine research based, problem oriented, learner-centred approach provides a way forward. A must read for scholars and entrepreneurs that feel and experience the challenge."

> --Christian Felzensztein, PhD, International Scholar & Entrepreneur, Spain, and Former Dean's Chair, New Zealand

"John Reilly and Romeo Turcan have crystallised what people working in and around higher education have begun to feel. In this book, the seismic shifts affecting the top tiers of academe are laid bare and their consequences on the sector explored. The range of voices brought together in the volume lead to recommended priorities and possible pathways for those engaged in curriculum design, learning development, research, and research dissemination."

> —Dr Simon Haslam, Visiting Fellow, Durham University Business School, UK

"Timely, sharp and inspiring! In today's chaotic world, this book dispels the clouds to let us see the sun. Authors provide unique opinions and answers to major issues with which universities globally have to contend with in the tsunami of populism. Besides educators, every one of us should turn our attention to the message this book is conveying."

—Prof. Dr. Xiaotian Zhang, Associate Vice President, Shanghai University, China

# Romeo V. Turcan • John E. Reilly Editors Populism and Higher Education Curriculum Development: Problem Based Learning as a Mitigating Response

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To our families

#### Foreword

This book tackles the audacious supposition that 'radical reform of curriculum, learning and teaching philosophies and methods and mission is essential because of unprecedented and multifaceted external developments for which graduates need to be prepared'. From the outset we are presented with a wide-ranging, thought-provoking call to arms for those who have longed for reform, a re-energised active academia with a more visible role in the management of the teaching and learning agenda within universities and in society in general. Given the events of the spring of 2020, these issues seem uncannily prescient and the authors ask searching questions of the role of universities and the academy in preparing students with sufficiently robust and enquiring minds, not just to survive but to embrace a world of increasing and sometimes conflicting demands and expectations of them.

The world of academia, once the natural home of creativity and experimentation, collides with the 'real' world which is characterised by uncertainty, blurred reality, neoliberalism, marketisation, populism, and increasing costs yet dwindling resources. The authors explore the challenges posed for curriculum by the plethora of external drivers which tug at the heart of academia and usher in new drivers—industry, employers, technological advances all pushing for creativity and distinctiveness, against a backdrop of increasingly directive regulation and a demand for comparability and uniformity of not just how but what we can measure to indicate its 'value'.

While the text acknowledges the role of social sciences in embracing and making sense of these agendas, it also suggests that there is room for further criticality in the scientific disciplines where evidence-based thinking is linked to the validity of data, especially in data science. The commitment to graduate skills is a feature of many institutional approaches to curriculum development, with critical and creative thinking seen as core skills, albeit often interpreted in terms of subject-specific skills. The European Higher Education Area Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance states that 'Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process'. This Delphic prose is open to interpretation, but it poses a further challenge to understandings of academic autonomy and relations between learner and teacher in the new learner-centred paradigm. Students are as susceptible to populism as other members of society.

The book explores aspects of the 'populism tsunami' and the challenges to navigating the surfeit of demands for creativity and problem-solving. For a dyed-in-the-wool professional administrator like myself, I am heartened by the scintilla of hope offered for the academy to survive the impact of such turbulence.

Director of Education Policy and Quality Maureen McLaughlin University of Warwick Coventry, UK

### Preface

The academic world faces a tsunami in which knowledge and evidencebased understanding and decisions are in danger of being swept away by the deluge of populist propaganda and assertion masquerading as the new truths. The populist pandemic represents a major challenge to learning and teaching in all disciplines and the failure of the academic body to foster the societal engagement of learners and engage actively itself means that the challenge is now a red alert or in government parlance at a 'critical' level requiring an urgent and exceptional response. Hence the need for, and purpose of, this book.

We identify a range of issues with which universities globally have to contend. These 'forces' pose grave challenges to conventional curriculum content and learning and teaching, and the mind sets of students and graduates. We argue the need for their active engagement with the global experience that 'isms' triumph over evidence and identity relations reinforce beliefs even if they run counter to evidence. While the message is universal, those who shape curriculum in different regions and countries will need to address their specific manifestation of political, scientific, cultural and social 'populism'.

What actually drives curriculum content and structure, and learning and teaching methods? This book explores how Problem Based Learning (PBL) is shaped by non-academic, external social and political factors and in particular the extent to which the curriculum and learning and teaching need to respond to populism and the populist agenda.

The range of examples considered affect curriculum content and teaching and learning: PBL philosophy, methodology and tools: increased government (including international organizations such as the EU, OECD, UNESCO) directives and interventions; mass participation; gender politics; the impact of social media; the impact of populism; the need to adjust to widening participation and social inclusion; resurgence of nationalism; the rhetoric of entrepreneurism; the skills agenda; the implications of the shift to student-centred learning; the influence of league tables; quality assurance structures; employers demands; emphasis on skills; privatization in and monetization of higher education; work-based learning and placement learning; international competition; funding including high tuition fees.

Does PBL provide an effective response to any or all of these and many more external influences? Does PBL offer a counter force to a 'Populist' agenda for higher education? Does it work in different ways in different subjects and different countries?

The original contributions explore external and internal 'interventions' that should result in curriculum change. They evaluate whether PBL provides an effective response and equips graduates in all subjects to cope with populist swings of focus and preoccupations. The contributions from different countries and regions indicate how national and regional perspectives as well as internal organization emphasise different aspects of PBL and demonstrate whether in practice the learner has become the centre of the process or is simply a vehicle to reflect the requirements of the external forces shaping curriculum.

This book has grown out of a project implemented in the Republic of Moldova funded by the European Commission under the ERASMUS+ programme: *Introducing Problem Based Learning in Moldova: Toward Enhancing Students' Competitiveness and Employability* (PBLMD).<sup>1</sup> PBLMD implemented PBL-based teaching and learning methods in Moldova in six BSc study programmes from six different, specialised universities. Each university team was free to choose the level of pilot

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>www.pblmd.aau.dk—is the official website of the PBLMD project.

implementation of PBL: subject, module, semester, study programme, department, faculty, or university. However, the early stage of development and implementation revealed the extent of 'taken-for-granted' understanding and beliefs about PBL.

Implementing PBL in an emerging, developing economy underscored the extant institutional voids at macro, meso and micro levels that questioned our assumptions and expectations about PBL in advanced economies. It revealed the nature of these assumptions and expectations. The explicit assumptions and expectations were generic and difficult to understand how to apply and implement at all levels in a university, hence difficult to see their practical value. Tacit assumptions and expectations were challenging to document, thus difficult to ensure their transferability to other study programmes due to specificity of their scope and applicability.

While universities have always needed to react to external developments, they have been more in control than they are today. Curriculum is being shaped and to an increasing extent, dominated by powerful nonacademic and non-accountable forces.

Inevitably, this book cannot cover all the non-academic and nonaccountable forces that, to an increasing extent, shape curriculum. However, we argue that the genuine learner-centred approach exemplified in problem- and research-based problem focused learning offers effective pathways for tomorrow's learners and an effective preparation and response to the 'Populist' world with which graduates will have to contend. To achieve this goal requires a radical re-appraisal of methods of learning and teaching and curriculum content. The book should therefore be seen as a beginning of an exploration of the relationship between PBL and populism and other external challenges in higher education which it is hoped will encourage further scholarly and policy debates.

Aalborg, Denmark Kent, UK Romeo V. Turcan John E. Reilly

## Acknowledgements

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We express our gratitude to all the contributors who submitted interesting, thought-provoking chapters on aspects of PBL and Populism, which we hope will help to reveal some of the complexities of the topic.

We appreciate and thank Mary Eleanor Mensah, a research assistant at the Theory Building Research Programme (www.tbrp.aau.dk), for her assistance and support in multiple aspects of the book production process, including, but not limited to, coordination and management of the communication between the contributors and the editors, coordination of the review process, formatting the papers, including hyperlinking the references.

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John E. Reilly Romeo V. Turcan

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