# The rise of the ‘non-traditional’ student

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They are now the majority of students worldwide, their expectations are different, and universities must step up to the challenge or be left behind.

Most universities focus on traditional students – those who enter straight from high school, study full-time and live on or near campus. However, non-traditional students – older, part-time and often returning to their education mid-career – are actually the majority of students and their expectations can be very different, said Joseph Aoun, president of Boston’s Northeastern University. “They’re telling us, ‘Things are changing, wake up.’”

Dr. Aoun, speaking at an Ottawa conference, “Canadian universities in a global context,” said non-traditional students are particularly eager for experiential learning opportunities – the integration of the classroom experience and real-world learning. “They want to choose programs with a strong value proposition and very solid outcomes. They ask, ‘Will these programs get me jobs?’” These students also want programs to be flexible and adaptable, he said. “They want options that fit into their family lives and their professions.”

Dr. Aoun’s talk was entitled “The Rise of the Rest.” The two-day conference, co-hosted by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the University of Alberta, brought together more than 80 educational leaders from countries including Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Australia, the U.K. and the U.S. to discuss shared challenges in a time of fiscal constraint and changing international trends.

The rise of non-traditional students is not just a North American phenomenon but is worldwide, Dr. Aoun continued. “Every college and university – in Canada and throughout the world – will be grappling with the implications.”

Looking at emerging nations such as India and China, Dr. Aoun says the main challenge is “the sheer scale” of demand. India, for example, wants to add 500 million students to higher education in the next 10 years. Other challenges include a lack of trained faculty and outdated curricula.

A number of recent innovations in higher education are worth a look, he said. These include adaptive learning approaches, competency-based education and massive open online courses, or MOOCs, among others.

“In the United States, you hear that MOOCs are going to help the whole world,” said Dr. Aoun. But, he noted, there are many places that don’t have Internet connectivity or reliable electricity. Also, he said, MOOCs don’t have the experiential component which makes graduates “job ready.”

So what comes next? “If there is a gap, this gap is going to be filled. And it is going to be filled by people who are closer to it, in general,” said Dr. Aoun. This is already happening, with new models starting to emerge in the developing world whose characteristics include low cost, scalability, flexibility, physical nimbleness, and outcomes that are “relevant and adapted to the environment they are in.”

As emerging economies generate their own distinctive approaches, there is likely to be considerable “reverse innovation,” in which Western higher education systems learn to adapt those approaches. “Higher education [in the Western world] now has a choice: either we restrict ourselves in serving only the traditional learners – serving the minority – or we look at serving all the learners.”

Until now, the decision clearly has been to serve the traditional learners, he said. The consequence has been the rise of for-profit institutions “who saw the opportunity and are taking full advantage of it.” Private-sector, for-profit institutions are the fastest growing institutions of higher education worldwide, he said.

As demand for higher education increases around the world, “it is up to us to meet that demand or to restrict

ourselves. The opportunity is there, let’s take advantage of it.”