The twenty-first century has borne witness to a steadily increasing pattern of global interdependence, a keystone of which has been the progressive and seemingly inescapable conjoining of economic activity throughout the world. This trajectory has been amplified by the role being paid by technology of all forms, but most especially (perhaps!) those that link information, computing, communication, and automation. Whereas, 20-some years ago, David Harvey’s judgment that contemporary globalization had resulted in the annihilation of time and space seemed perhaps to border on overstatement, today it is a proposition that few would contest (1990). Situated in the center of this transformation is the nature of work in economies of all stripes, as these forces of change rapidly influence the kinds of work being done, where, and by whom. Closely linked to these phenomena is the myriad of ties that link education at all levels with what we can more appropriately term the “worlds of work.” It is also true, that there remains a digital divide that shuts out over 60 percent of the world that does not participate in those aspects of globalization that require this form of technology. This fact has significant implications for the link between learning and work (see Internet World Stats, available online at http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm).
And for all that we accept, almost in a commonsensical manner, the root proposition that education and economic accomplishment are inseparably linked, it is nevertheless often the case that the internal dynamics and structures of education and economy operate such that, as societal sectors, they are out of alignment. This oft-marked misalignment crisis has had two distinct features that have occurred in various and different societies throughout the world. On the one hand, even as economic growth has propelled society after society into the so-called massification stage of higher education, its institutions have tended to produce graduates ill suited for the demands of the economies into which they are entered: in the worst of cases they are merely unemployable. On the other hand, as higher education institutions (HEIs) in many societies struggle to adapt to patterns of changing economic development and job demands, the very nature of the societies in which they are situated is being significantly impacted by economic transformative forces. It is from this continuously interactive structure that we conclude that, within this alignment dilemma, higher education inevitably tends to play a “catch up” role—it is always, in some important senses, “behind the curve” in seeking to behave responsibly in preparing its graduates for the world they are about to confront when leaving higher education. This is true both among the “connected” and the “disconnected” worlds. The critique of higher education has ranged from the classical Dore “Diploma Disease” whereby HEIs, especially in emerging economies, are simply providing credentials regardless of alignment to the work place, to the debate on the vocationalization of HE versus the quest for general education and liberal arts (Dore 1997).

Several structural and behavioral consequences flow from this situation/circumstance. One is the pattern of educational re-entry, as workers within these transitional economies find it necessary to return to higher education to retrain themselves, in an effort to accommodate a constantly changing job market. This is not a new idea, as many HEIs have successfully offered a variety of Extension classes for adult retraining.1 What is new is that the speed, efficiency, and cost factors are being transformed through the use of mixed technology. A major target market for these new digital programs are the so-called “baby-boomers” who find that the changing economy is extending their work-life and that, in many cases, they are not prepared for the skills being required. There is a variety of modes of this sort of learning platform and many are composed of collaborative partnerships between the traditional university extension and the private sector. For example, at UCLA Extension, the new “Empowered UCLA” program is a partnership with