GUEST ESSAY

From art faculties to law schools — demand for blockchain education has exploded

(Image: iStock)

By Steven Boykey Sidley

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One of the fun things to do when trying to gaze into the future of any subject is to try to find out what courses students are taking at university and, equally, what new courses are being offered by universities in response to demand. For decades, the most popular course at Stanford University has been Introduction to Computer Science. This year, it got flipped. The most popular course is Introduction to Blockchain.

I was taken aback when I saw this flit about in a Twitter feed a few weeks back, so I went digging.

A survey carried out by Coinbase a couple of years back caught the first glimpse of what is accelerating now. Demand for blockchain education has outstripped its techie origins and found itself lusted after by all faculties – STEM, finance, law, social sciences.
The survey showed students in every faculty were looking to take blockchain classes, including over 50% of social science students. And this was in 2019.

Given the speed with which the crypto industry has taken root and grown into a many-splendoured thing (currencies, NFTs, Defi, Metaverse, Web 3, DAOs), so its influence has
started to be felt in nooks and crannies of human
endeavour far removed from the grubby and dry
financial markets.

Take law. Professor Campbell Harvey of Duke
University has stated flatly: “Law students that are
trained in blockchain, they don’t need to apply
anywhere. People are just asking them to join their
firms.”

The regulation and legislation and attendant
enforcement is now a massive growth industry.
Law firms in every country are simply unable to
find enough people with requisite skill sets.

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Law schools like Harvard in the US are only just
starting to offer courses, and most of them are
quite basic. This is as wide a supply-demand
imbalance as you can imagine.

Or art education. No surprise here. The column inches afforded the NFT-tethered art markets are loud and insistent. There are few serious art professionals – from artists to curators to gallerists to collectors – who are not now aware that something important is afoot, even as some of them may decry the barbarians at the gate trying to topple a comfortably closeted industry which has existed for a long time.

And so courses are springing up at art faculties worldwide – including non-academic institutions like art auction houses Christies and Sotheby’s, which clearly have the most to gain (and lose) from this new technology.
A nuclear bomb just exploded in the middle of the cryptoverse

An astonishing thing happened in the world of crypto last week. So much so, that I didn’t believe it when I first saw it. It has received almost no attention in the popular press, but a hot, red apoplexy from anyone and everyone in crypto. It bodes ill for, well, a lot of people, and not only those who are connected to this field.

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Obviously math, computer science, engineering, economics and business facilities have revved up. But a quick turn through Google Scholar reveals a much more exotic smorgasbord of research papers connecting the cryptographic progeny of blockchains to all manner of genteel ivory tower pursuits – ethics, game theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology. Titles like “Anthropology and Blockchain” and “Tokenization: The Key to Philosophy, Physics, and Psychology” and “Toward a Political Sociology of Blockchain”.

But universities, like most institutions, are torpid creatures.
Developing curriculums is a complex craft, as well as an art. There are certifications and peer reviews and marketing and collateral and exams to prepare, and almost no textbooks on which to call. And so we find that the educational gap has been filled elsewhere by more nimble players – those who can manoeuvre at the speed of their subject’s innovation.

First, there is the ubiquitous YouTube. It brims with free courses ranging from the cringy to the wonderfully pedagogical. On every facet of this quickly spreading crypto industry – from the underlying maths through to philosophy. This is where I got my blockchain education; it is a bounty of offerings.

Then there is Twitter, where one finds some of the “deep” thinking (yes, that Twitter – you just have to know who to follow). If you rise above the inane bluster and insult, you can find the sorts of discussions, ruminations and expositions one used to pay good money for.


And then, finally, the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) like Udemy, Coursera, Udacity Edx, who have sprinted into the space, offering a mouthwatering menu of low-cost options to aspirant blockchain professionals around the world.
These courses are designed by academics, gifted amateurs, practitioners and other enthusiasts – quality filtered by the brutal evolutionary pressures of the market, perhaps pointing to a future tilt in the balance of power in education.

And in this crypto world, recruiters rarely ask where you got your university education, as they might do for other fields.

They know that skills are scarce and formal education threadbare, so hiring criteria are, well, a little more creative. Like, what YouTube courses you have attended.

The cynic in me expects that some of these young minds flocking to take blockchain courses may be looking for fast routes to wealth.

But in my most optimistic moments, I would like to believe that many who are trying to find out about blockchain are doing so because of what it represents, rather than the pockets it may line.

**DM**

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