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2011-01-01

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Recommended Citation
Hazelkorn, E.: Three Key Challenges Facing Higher Education and Policymakers. In Libraries of Webscale, OCLC, 2011

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Three Key Challenges Facing Higher Education and Policymakers

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Our pre-occupation with the relative standing of universities and national education systems – illustrated by the growing popularity and obsession with university rankings – reflects the consensus that higher education is essential for economic growth, global competitiveness and a civil society. Universities and nations are being measured according to indicators of global capacity and potential in which comparative and competitive advantages come into play. The more globalisation drives a single market in education, as it does in most goods and services, the more higher education is a beacon for investment and talent – the more this kind of barometer is inevitable.

While each country and university faces particular and often unique challenges, there are common factors which affect most countries around the world today – issues which have become more acute since the global financial crisis 2008. Let me focus on the three big challenges of the moment: 1) ensuring sustainable higher education systems at the same time that public funding is decreasing and competitiveness increasing; 2) improving the quality of the total student experience at the same time that the demand for participation is growing; 3) strengthening knowledge and innovation as drivers of growth while ensuring that multi- and cross-disciplinary critical inquiry is maintained.

1) The application of knowledge is now widely acknowledged as being the source of social, economic and political power. Studies repeatedly show the strong correlation between educational attainment and social and economic advantages for individuals and society. Over the last decades, access to higher education has expanded from being a privilege of birth or talent or both (elite phase) to a right for those with certain qualifications (mass phase) to being an obligation for the vast majority of society and occupations (universal). However, the financial crisis has exposed fundamental weaknesses in the funding model underpinning higher education. The financial troubles in California are symptomatic of problems around the world. Whether funded from public or private sources, escalating costs and tuition fees has prompted *The Economist* to suggest that higher education could be the next bubble (Schumpeter, 13 April 2011). At the same time, higher education faces increasing competition from China and India. What is the best way to sustain mass higher education at a time of decreasing public funding and escalating global competitiveness? Can tuition fees continue to rise – and what are the implications for widening access to a more diverse student cohort? Are there new business

models or financial instruments more appropriate to the new environment? What regulatory and governance frameworks would work best?

2) The quality of higher education is coming under increasing scrutiny. If higher education is the engine of the economy, governments are looking for verifiable and measurable evidence of benefit and impact. Students, as consumers, are questioning the value-for-money of their study programme relative to the tuition fee that they pay or the institution's status and reputation. Evidence of quality and the pursuit of excellence have become the key mantra dominating higher education, inside and outside the academy. Rankings have emerged as a simple short-hand for students and the public to gauge quality – but do rankings really measure what's meaningful? What level of accountability is required? As participation widens beyond the traditional student cohort, how should pedagogical methods and modes of learning adapt? To enhance the quality of the total student experience, what barriers should be eliminated?

3) The rising prominence and obsession with global rankings have highlighted the investment attractiveness of nations based upon the capacity of their universities to produce new knowledge and lead innovation. In response, many countries have spearheaded a review of their higher education system. The world-class research university has become the panacea for ensuring success in the global economy and world science. Kansas and Texas want to improve the performance of their universities because they are a magnet for investment; Sri Lanka has announced a strategy to upgrade six universities. Malaysia has a similar aim, and so does Nigeria, Denmark, France and Germany – to name just a few. However, many of these developments are leading to the prioritisation of scientific and technological research over investment in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Our societies face serious problems; unemployment is major issue. But, at the time when scientific and social challenges require collaborative interventions from a multi-disciplinary perspective, there is growing evidence that simplistic economic indicators are being used to measure research quality. These changes are impacting on and changing universities, often in perverse ways. As the emphasis shifts to translating knowledge more quickly into new products and services, how can we ensure that the breadth of intellectual inquiry required to underpin civil society is preserved?

We often look upon changes within our universities as peculiar to it, a phantom of the management or the culture. But the changes being experienced are worldwide. It is no cliché to say that higher education and policymakers are facing major challenges.