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What's wrong with Higher Education Policy?

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Globalisation has been forcing change across all knowledge-intensive industries, creating a single world market. These developments have intensified during the global financial crisis, challenging presumptions about the "world order". As countries vie with each other for a share of the global market, comparative and competitive advantages come into play – with geopolitical implications. Higher education has not been immune.

The on-going obsession with global rankings reflects the realization that in a global knowledge economy, national pre-eminence is no longer enough. By focusing on the top 100 universities, out of over 17,000 higher education institutions (HEIs) world-wide, rankings have promulgated the "world-class university" as the panacea for success in the global economy.

In response, many governments are busy restructuring their higher education and research systems to ensure they can better compete. There is increasing emphasis on value-for-money, international benchmarking and (public) investor confidence. Some countries are investing heavily while others are financially restricted.

These developments are exposing major contradictions at the heart of national and global higher education strategies and policies. Three examples:

1. Accordingly to UNESCO, there are almost 160m students enrolled worldwide in higher education today compared with only 30m in 1970. To meet this escalating demand, one sizeable new university will need to open every week over the next decades. At the same time, universal access – measured by participation rates exceeding 50% of the 18-22 age cohort – is the norm in many developed countries. These demands are putting pressure on national budgets, many of which are straining under the weight of budget deficits.

Yet, at a time when higher education is in greatest demand – and is being asked to provide greater benefit for society – many governments are choosing to concentrate resources in a small number of elite "world-class" universities. They aim to (re)create the "Harvard here" model whereby a few universities dominate within a hierarchically differentiated system. There are many national versions in France, Germany, Russia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, Japan, Singapore, Latvia, etc. But the fiscal

requirements of a world-class university – estimated at over $2bn annually – goes far beyond many national budgets.

In addition, while this type of restructuring was initially thought desirable in order to create what Richard Florida (2002) calls "Silicon somewhere", it has now been shown to have many disadvantages. And, it may not be either feasible or desirable as it could undermine national economic capacity. For many countries, in today's world, policy choices are often a zero-sum game.

2. Higher education's role as an indicator of national global competitiveness has magnified its significance as a beacon for investment and talent. In response to demographic changes which threaten strategies for growing knowledge-intensive industries, many countries are developing policies to attract high-achieving researchers and professionals. Indeed, over 40% of the US research enterprise in science and technology is dependent upon international research students, while Catalonia (Spain) has created the ICREA programme. Denmark and the Netherlands have devised immigration policies targeting people from high-ranked universities.

While countries attract talent from abroad, what are they doing to nurture talent at home?

3. There is little dispute that excellence in research lies at the heart of science policy, and must be a key determinant of academic quality. But global rankings, with their reliance on bibliometric practices, over-emphasize the physical, life and medical sciences and traditional academic outputs of peer-reviewed articles. In so doing, they have privileged these disciplines and influenced resource allocation at the national and institutional level. This has led to growing segregation between research and teaching within individual universities, and between different types of HEIs.

These developments are occurring at the same time that international opinion is stressing the importance of research-informed teaching to ensure students have critical thinking skills to underpin the knowledge economy. While traditional models of university-based research measure impact and benefit narrowly in terms of citations and publications, scientists at the recent World Science Forum in Budapest (November 2011) spoke of science's social and public responsibility. Global rankings focus attention on individual institutional performance, but the world's major global challenges require collaborative and interdisciplinary solutions and inter-locking innovation systems.

What do these developments tell us about the shape of things to come?

Higher education has always been competitive, but globalisation has created a new sense of urgency because of its impact on and implications for the "world order" – especially in the aftermath of the GFC. The demand for higher education and the knowledge society is pushing up the status premium of elite universities – and their nations. And, because no government can fund all the post-secondary education its society demands,

many are making the insidious connection between excellence and exclusiveness.

Powerful forces are pushing a return to elite models of education and knowledge production in the belief that elite institutions have higher quality or more benefit for society. This is leading to growing hierarchical differentiation between *privatised, selective, research, elite* universities and *public, recruiting, teaching, mass* HEIs, education systems – and their respective nations. As Saskia Sassen (2011) says, there is likely to be a "savage sorting of winners and losers".

There is little doubt that higher education exists in a complex and competitive environment, where quality and excellence are key mantra. It's also clear that scrutiny from a wide range of stakeholders is inevitable, and that institutional survival is no longer guaranteed.

It is time to adopt a new paradigm. Social and economic success is not the result of a single world-class or flagship university. Rather than producing what the Lisbon Council calls "hordes of Nobel laureates or cabals of tenure and patent bearing professors", we should build a *world-class system* comprised of a diverse set of higher education institutions interacting with each and the wider community.

Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education. The Battle for World-Class Excellence is published by Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.
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