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Higher Education – Open to the World?

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Abstract

There are two major current trends in higher education globally. One is ‘massification’, (i.e. a steady increase in the numbers seeking access to higher learning) that is particularly challenging for developing countries in terms of quality and affordability. The second is the impact of the economic crisis that has provoked austerity measures on both richer and the poorer nations. How can higher education do more with less?

The UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education explored these challenges and identified new and more diverse modes of provision that can make higher education more open, especially in developing countries. First is the development of open and distance learning (ODL) and ICTs, a domain in which the sharing of Open Educational Resources holds particular promise. Second is the growing role of the private and for-profit sectors, which historically played an important role in the development of ODL and are re-entering the field vigorously. Third is the increasing prevalence of cross-border higher education, some of which is conducted online. The paper will explore these opportunities for opening higher education to the world and the challenges and opportunities they pose.

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

It is a pleasure to give this keynote, which I have entitled *Higher Education – Open to the World?* I start with UNESCO’s 2009 World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE), which had as its theme *The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development*. I shall explore some of these new dynamics to show how higher education can be more open to the world.

For two decades development agencies and many governments have made the achievement of universal primary schooling their key educational goal. Now that this goal is within reach the emphasis is shifting to post-basic education. This switch of focus led UNESCO to organise a Second World Conference on Higher Education in 2009 and I had the honour of being its Executive Secretary.

It was an enthusiastic gathering and the participants agreed that ‘*at no time in history has it been more important to invest in higher education as a major force in building and inclusive and diverse knowledge society and to advance research, innovation and creativity*’ (Communiqué, Preamble).

However, enthusiasm for developing higher education has to face the reality of a widespread economic crisis in which it is a tempting target for governmental austerity measures. Higher education will have to do more with less. This means that the public sector will not be able to deal with the growing demand alone. We must be ready to embrace new dynamics.

Some New Dynamics

Let me identify some of the more significant new dynamics in higher education today. They are rising demand – or massification; diversification; cross-border higher education; private provision; distance education and open educational resources.

Rising demand means diversification

The dominant new dynamic is rising demand. University degrees are widely seen as passports to a good future and demand for higher education has been growing rapidly.

For example, higher education has expanded at a dizzying pace in China which currently enrolls 27 million students, more than any other nation. The United States has 18 million students and there are around 15 million in India, which aims to increase that number dramatically. (UIS, 2010). Meanwhile, although enrolment in Africa has risen at a faster rate than elsewhere in percentage terms (by some 66% since 1999), Sub-Saharan Africa still has the lowest participation rate (5.6%) in the world. We can expect major numerical growth there.

Globally, nearly one-third of the population (29.3%) is under 15. Today there are 165 million people enrolled in tertiary education. Projections suggest that participation will peak at 263 million in 2025. As an exercise, take these extra 98 million students and calculate how many new places will need to be created each week for the next 14 years to accommodate them. The result, that it would require four major universities (of over 30,000 students each) to open every week, indicates that business as usual will not be enough.

It will not be possible to satisfy this rising demand, especially in developing countries, by relying on traditional public sector approaches. New providers of higher education are emerging.

Open and Distance Learning and ICTs

Of special interest here is the growing role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and ICTs. Over recent decades large open universities have multiplied around the world and become powerful players in national higher education systems. These institutions, some of which enrol more than one million students, are an important response to the challenge of growing demand. They demonstrate that technology can play a significant role in the massification of higher education because technology can achieve wider access, high quality and lower cost simultaneously. Sir John Daniel presented this as a revolutionary development at the WCHE using his well-known analogy of the iron triangle.

Institutions can, of course, make learning open in different ways. The UK Open University, which gave the term ‘open’ to the vocabulary of higher education, opened up higher education in two ways. It removed all academic pre-requisites for admission and it

operated at a distance. Its mission is to be open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas.

People, places, methods, and ideas evolve and the Open University has evolved with them. Openness to methods was clearly required by the decision to carry out distance teaching at scale, and openness to ideas reflected a desire to use its scale and academic power to re-think the orthodoxy in some disciplines.

Nevertheless, the Open University curriculum is closed in the sense that the courses are defined and developed by the University – students must take them or leave them although they have great flexibility to mix and match.

These two dimensions of openness have been widely copied and there are now millions of students in the world's open universities. In his 1996 book *Mega-universities*, Sir John identified 11 mega-universities each enrolling over 100,000 distance learners. The oldest mega-university, which is represented at this conference by Vice-Principal Narend Bajjnath, is the University of South Africa, UNISA. Its origins go back to the University of the Cape of Good Hope in the 19th century but it has been a distance teaching university since 1946. In recent years it has had to face various challenges of openness head-on, first in responding to the needs of the new South Africa that was born in the 1990s and then in merging with Technikon SA and Vista University to become an institution of over 200,000 students.

Since Sir John's book was published the mega-universities have grown and new ones have been created. At least three of them; in China, India and Pakistan, now have over a million students each. A question for you is how large can a mega-university become and still remain manageable.

There are other dimensions of openness. When the UKOU opened 40 years ago, the State University of New York set up Empire State College with the aim of opening up the curriculum by allowing students to invent their own courses of study according to their interests and needs. Empire State College's slogan 'my degree, my way' captures this perfectly. Empire State College is also represented here by its President, Alan Davis. Its experience is particularly topical today as Open Educational Resources play a larger role in higher education.

World-class universities

While some parts of higher education have become more open, you could say that others are going in the opposite direction. I refer to the trend of so-called 'World-Class' Universities.

This trend feeds on the mushrooming phenomenon of university rankings which, while controversial, undoubtedly influence governments. The Shanghai University Rankings have certainly increased the visibility of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University. However, many question the criteria used in rankings and their methodological limitations. Since most rankings focus almost exclusively on research, chasing higher places in the rankings is leading some universities to boost research at the expense of teaching.

The WCHE concluded that countries should build world-class higher education **systems** adapted to local needs rather than cossetting a few world-class **institutions**.

Private Higher education

A key aspect of the diversification of higher education is the growth of the private for-profit sector. Private higher education is now the fastest growing sub-sector and globally these institutions enrol some 30% of all students. Some countries (Japan, South Korea) enrol 80% of their students in private higher education institutions.

Research by Tony Bates, who will be known to many of you, shows that the private sector is moving much more quickly into eLearning than the public sector. Noting also that students are turning to online learning in larger numbers, Sir John Daniel has raised the question 'will higher education split' in a number of recent speeches. Extrapolating current trends he constructs a future scenario in which the private sector will do most of the teaching and the public sector will focus on research.

Perhaps the question for us here is whether the private sector is intrinsically better than public institutions at conducting quality online teaching at scale. After all, it was the private sector that dominated the early years of distance learning through correspondence schools.

Cross-border higher education

Various trends of diversification come together in cross-border higher education (CBHE), which is steadily expanding in response to unmet demand in some countries. CBHE is defined as 'higher education that occurs when the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders'.

Cross-border higher education can take different forms, ranging from branch campuses and franchises of universities offering courses abroad to eLearning across borders. If regulated properly, it offers great opportunities for capacity building at institutional level both in teaching and learning. However, in the absence of regulation, CBHE readily lends itself to fraud and low quality provision, the most extreme example being degree mills that sell diplomas without academic requirements.

At UNESCO we tried to promote quality in CBHE by developing joint guidelines with the OECD in 2005 on Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education. The principles are as relevant as ever six years later. The quality of cross-border higher education is a shared responsibility between importing and exporting countries; quality assurance should cover cross-border education in all its forms (student, academic, programme and institution mobility); stakeholders should collaborate internationally to enhance transparency about the quality of HE and about HE systems generally; cross-border delivery should have the same quality as home delivery.

Open educational resources

A final manifestation of the opening up of higher education that I wish to note is Open Educational Resources. A decade ago, when MIT announced that it would give access to some of its course materials online for free, this OpenCourseWare initiative was met with both enthusiasm and suspicion. A UNESCO Forum in 2002 explored how the OCW could benefit developing countries and coined the term Open Educational Resources. This has now become a global movement, although it is still largely a movement of OER producers. Awareness of OER among government policy makers remains limited.

The 2009 WCHE devoted a session to OER and its Communiqué stated:

ODL approaches and ICTs present opportunities to widen access to quality education, particularly when Open Educational Resources are readily shared by many countries and higher education institutions.

Following the 2009 WCHE, UNESCO and COL teamed up in a project called *Taking OER Beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity* with the aim of informing developing world decision-makers about the game-changing potential of OER.

In the last eighteen months we held six workshops about OER for decision-makers in Africa and Asia and conducted three online workshops. These reached hundreds of decision makers from many countries, most of whom previously had only a vague idea about OER.

To back up the next phase of the project we have created two documents. The first, published last month, is a *Basic Guide to OER*, written by South Africa's Neil Butcher under the editorial guidance of COL's vice-president, Asha Kanwar, and myself. Also issued last month, as a collaborative effort by UNESCO's Zeynep Varoglu and COL's Trudi van Wyk, were *Guidelines for OER in Higher Education*. These Guidelines are now out for formal consultation.

The next stage of this work, just beginning, is a COL-UNESCO collaboration that aims to get greater buy-in from governments to the promotion of OER and of open licences generally. On 21-22 June 2012 UNESCO will hold a World Conference on OER in Paris, where we hope governments will adopt a conference statement urging that all educationally useful materials produced with public funds be made available under the most open licences possible.

I should be most interesting in your take on OER. Are they just another of educational technology's passing fads, or do they justify the hopes that UNESCO and COL are investing in them?

Conclusion

I shall leave it there. I have shown that higher education is diversifying in various ways in order to address the overwhelming imperative of rising demand. On the way I have asked three questions:

- Is there a limit to the ability of ODL and ICTs to satisfy this demand?
- Will the private sector prove to be better than public institutions at offering ODL?
- Are OER just another educational technology fad?

I look forward to your responses.

Thank you.