

Towards New Agendas and Models in Higher Education



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Theme:

*Facing Global and Local Challenges: the New Dynamics for
Higher Education*

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Commonwealth of Learning*

Introduction

It is an honour to give the last keynote address to this most stimulating conference and a special privilege to have my good friend and colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić as the chair of the session. She launched some very successful initiatives in international higher education during my time as ADG for Education and I am delighted that she is at the centre of the organisation of this most important World Conference that UNESCO will host in Paris next July. Thanks to the excellent organisation of this meeting by our colleague Molly Lee, I think that our discussions here in Macao have contributed significantly to the agenda for the world event.

It is also an honour to be followed by our Regional Director for Asia-Pacific, my friend Sheldon Shaeffer. We joined UNESCO together in 2001 and he is doing a wonderful job here.

My title is *Towards New Agendas and Models in Higher Education*. My aim is to explore in simple terms why we need new models and what they might be.

My remarks will be in three parts: first, why do we need new models for higher education; second, what is wrong with our current policy agendas and models of provision; and third, what might new ones look like?

Why new Agendas and Models for Higher Education?

So, first, why do we need new models for higher education? There are many reasons but I shall name just three.

Access, quality, cost: an iron triangle?

First, the major global policy agenda for higher education in this first part of the 21st century is to raise the age participation rates (APRs) in developing countries. Today APR levels of 35% or more are considered necessary for a country to achieve sustainable development in a global knowledge economy. The figures that describe the great disparities in APRs around the world are well known.

The country report on Cambodia submitted to this conference provides a good illustration of the challenge that developing countries face.

The key point is that many countries want to raise APRs now. They want to provide wider access to better quality higher education before they have become prosperous enough to roll out higher education at scale using the traditional models of the richer countries.

Ministers of education in developing countries express their policy agendas for higher education in terms of access, quality and cost. They want to see wide access, high quality and low cost.

Making a triangle from these three vectors gives us a simple way of assessing different models of higher education and points to the need for a new approach.

For most traditional models of provision, the vectors make up an inflexible triangle - an iron triangle with sides that cannot readily be altered to deliver the ministerial agendas of wider access, higher quality and lower cost. Expanding access usually means reducing quality, especially if it is done at lower cost.

This iron triangle has been the bugbear of education throughout history. It has created an assumption in the public mind that quality and exclusivity must go together. Under this assumption an institution with tough admission requirements is a quality institution, regardless of what happens within its walls. Under this assumption it is futile to think that poor countries can ever extend quality higher education beyond the elite.

But can we challenge the assumption? The triangle of the vectors of access, quality and cost gives us a way of looking at models of higher education and asking whether the inflexible triangle could be made flexible.

I shall come back to that. I simply emphasise here that the first reason we need a new agenda is that most current models of provision do not combine quality and access at a cost that is scalable for most countries.

New types of students

The second reason we require new agendas and models is that students are changing. They are already much more varied than the 18-23 year-old full-timers that constituted almost the sole clientele for higher education for much of the last century. Because students are now very diverse it is futile to look for a stereotypical student around whom to plan. However, within the diversity there are some frequent traits which are found in countries rich and poor.

The most common feature is that they all want to obtain credentials of value. In addition, because many students must now earn a living, their daily study schedules vary greatly. Many are mobile, not simply between institutions in their own countries, but around the world. Thanks to technology they are better able to find learning resources on their own. They place limited value on physical presence and face-to-face communication because the Internet gives them access to social networking tools that did not exist even five years ago.

These characteristics of students are an increasingly difficult fit with the 'one faculty - one class - one timetable' model of instruction that is still widely prevalent. Today's students look for learning in other settings using a variety of technology-mediated approaches that are asynchronous and self-paced.

Some of the characteristics of today's students were well illustrated by the presentation of Spencer Benson from the University of Maryland about students who are digital natives and by our discussion of the evolving demands on the academic profession.

Globalism and nationalism

The third reason for new agendas and models is to balance globalism and nationalism. Today the local is connected to the remote. Students want to log on to the world. Yet greater global awareness also creates greater national awareness. How does higher education create global citizens who can also make an authentic contribution to the development of their own countries?

These are three reasons for new agendas and models: higher education must meet new objectives, cope with a diversity of students and live the tension between globalism and nationalism. I shall now focus particularly on models of provision? What is wrong with the models we have? What are the current models?

Models of Higher Education

I shall describe those models in simple terms and examine them from three angles. First, their economics: are they scalable to give wide access with good quality at low cost? Second, do they meet the needs of a diversifying student body? Third, how do these models fit with the evolving thinking about quality assurance and standards?

Nearly all higher education combines, in various proportions, three models which, to help you remember them, I shall call the community model, the communication model and the commodity model.

Higher Education as Community

In this region the Nalanda, the great Buddhist University which flourished in northern India in the first millennium, was an international student community that attracted scholars from China such as Huen Tsang.

In Europe, tradition has it that Oxford University began in the 13th century students when some English students who had been thrown out of the University of Paris for being drunk too often, moved to the city, rented houses as groups and brought in scholars to interact with them.

This model was given its theoretical underpinning in the 19th century by John Henry (Cardinal) Newman who once wrote: 'If I had to choose between a so-called University which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years... I have no hesitation in giving the preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun.'

It is hard to imagine any government today funding Newman's model of a university as simply a community of students. However, it still evokes nostalgia in academe and continues in the form of institutes of advanced study at the post-doctoral level. Not surprisingly, there have been no presentations at this conference of the model of the university as pure community, although there have been papers on the interactions between universities and their external communities, for example Kiyohiko Kuroda's paper on university-community linkages in Vietnam. Does the closer integration with their external communities make universities behave more like communities internally? I leave you to ponder that question.

Higher Education as Communication

Almost as old as the community model is the model of higher education as communication. It was expressed first as scholars reading books aloud to students (lectures). Today faculty compose their own classroom presentations but still call them lectures. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, speaking in the community tradition, disparaged this model as 'lecture bazaars under the absurd name of universities'. Yet, this of course is the primary model of higher education around the world today and the implicit point of reference of much of this conference, for example, Lrong Lim's paper on the 300,000 international student policy in Japan.

Higher Education as Commodity

Newman and Coleridge expressed their views in the context of a lively debate around the methods adopted in the 19th century by the new London University. London's first approach downplayed community in favour of lectures and examinations, arousing Coleridge's anger. The University then went much further and provoked Newman by completely delinking its examinations from study in any institution.

Sir Robert Lowe, the member of Parliament for London University, summed up this model by saying, 'what I mean by a university is an examining board'.

I call this the commodity model - and commodity is not a pejorative word in my vocabulary - because an examination is something that can be versioned in many ways and reproduced inexpensively at scale.

There has been rather little focus on examinations at this conference. However, papers such as Leo Goedegebuure's country report for Australia, by noting the increasing importance attached to the measurement of students' learning outcomes, did touch obliquely on testing students' knowledge and skills.

What's wrong with these Models?

Let us examine these models in terms of their cost structure, their capacity to absorb student diversity, and their fit with evolving notions of quality assurance and standards.

The learning community model has problems in all three areas. It is not scalable at reasonable cost; it does not fit the lifestyles of many students,; and its confidence in the benefits of simply putting students together sits uneasily with modern practices of quality assurance based on clear statements of purpose and explicit teaching-learning processes.

Although the communication model - or lecture bazaar - is the one that most of us take for granted, it is not much better. Economically it remains within the paradigm of the iron triangle because it does not allow you to increase access, lower costs and improve quality all at the same time. It used to be a good fit to the lifestyles of many students, who liked to go to classrooms at set times and listen passively to teachers, but this is becoming progressively less true as alternative paths to learning multiply.

Finally, as lecture bazaars multiply, those who fund such institutions are becoming less satisfied with approaches to quality assurance that simply ask whether institutions are fit for their declared purposes. They would really like to make judgements about the appropriateness of those purposes.

This has created an increasing interest in standards, which are both complex and controversial.

By contrast, the commodity model, in its pure form of examinations, is the mirror-image of the others. Its cost structure turns the iron triangle into an extendible triangle because it is scalable at low cost. Quality, understood as the standards set by examinations, can be set at whatever level is desired.

However, from the students' perspective it is a double-edged sword: it presents maximum convenience but also the greatest chance of failure. However, while an examination system does not fit comfortably with approaches to quality assurance that look at teaching and learning processes, it sits easily with reviews based on standards.

Elements of a New Model

We see that each model has its shortcomings. This is to be expected because if there were already an ideal model for providing higher education for the 21st century we would not be holding this conference. Few would propose any one of the models in its pure form. Learning communities always have some formal teaching, lecture bazaars usually have examinations, and testing systems must at least offer guidance in how to prepare for the examinations.

A successful model for the 21st century will be a blend of these three models. But how must it differ from the blends we have now? The economic analysis suggests less emphasis on learning communities and lectures and more on examinations because this gives the possibility of scaling up higher education inexpensively to meet the great demand for access in the developing world. Furthermore, changing student lifestyles also call for less face-to-face elements of community and communication.

A key development today is that vital elements of community and communication can be provided through technology with a new and favourable cost structure.

Most importantly technology is also the answer to the major shortcoming of the commodity model based on examinations. Technology almost makes communicating communities into commodities because it allows them to be expanded to match new needs at low cost. Furthermore, each new generation of technology further cuts costs and boosts communication capacity, most recently with the appearance of social networking tools.

Today's Web 2.0 is a thoroughly interactive affair and communities use it for a variety of purposes: there are sites for social book-marking; for custom searching; for organising micro-content; for social networking; for blogging; for podcasts; for videocasting and webcasting; for collaborative writing; and for project management. These sites attract a heavy volume of traffic especially from young people, even though only a tiny fraction of world's population in the age range from 15 to 25 is yet online. So far, however, the evolution of these platforms and their applications and services are mostly happening outside higher education.

Even the older forms of distance learning, based on the mass media of print and broadcasting, had made the iron triangle extendible. Today's media further cut the cost of producing and finding learning materials and of distributing them. Quality is also higher.

In designing models of higher education provision for the 21st century we should recall the results of the meta-analysis of 600 papers on distance learning conducted by Bernard and his colleagues. They distinguished three types of interaction in support of learning: student - content; student - student; and student - teacher.

They asked which type of interaction does most to enhance student performance when it increased and found that increasing interaction with content was most effective. Increasing interaction between students in turn did more for their performance than fostering greater interaction with teachers.

Putting all this together suggests an effective model that would build higher education around credible examination systems run by national bodies or established institutions, and then encourage a market of support providers to develop. Although the range of examinations would need to match the wide array of higher education programmes on offer, there is considerable room for aggregation and for some existing institutions to act as examining bodies for others.

Placing the functions of teaching and examining in different institutions may seem radical but it has numerous advantages. It makes issues of quality and standards much easier to address. Teaching institutions are challenged to raise their teaching to the level of the external examinations, rather than

dumbing down their examinations to fit their own teaching. Comparisons of institutional and student performance are made much easier. Having a few specialized examining bodies in any country will reduce the considerable corruption that mars internal institutional examinations in some parts of the world and could put degree mills out of business.

Students who register for examinations should have freedom to choose the amount of support that they need and can afford, creating a market for these services. There are many potential players in such a market including local public and private institutions teaching face-to-face as well as at a distance. There will also be organizations of various types operating across borders, but instead of expecting students to enrol for a complete package of teaching and assessment, institutions will unbundle the different elements of their support so that students can pick and choose. We've heard here about the tutorial companies in India that serve students worldwide.

Removing a major part of the examining function from many institutions will not eliminate the need for institutional quality assurance. UNESCO's Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education are as relevant to the cross-border provider giving partial support to students registered for the examinations of a third party as to the provider offering a complete teaching and assessment package.

However, some quality assurance systems could operate with a lighter touch, placing more emphasis on the quality of the processes for supporting students and the development of an institutional quality culture.

This model could allow developing countries to expand access rapidly at low cost with good quality. Elements of it are already present in some places. Although our focus is on developing countries, we suspect that elements of the systems we describe will gradually be adopted within established systems in rich countries - after all, they are not new.

This is not to predict convergence on a single model. National differences thrive in a globalised world. Concepts of quality in higher education will vary between countries and regions and the styles of the regional quality assurance networks will reflect these differences.

Conclusion

We have described a model that centres on examinations and allows students to choose different ways of preparing for them. Although this type of system has a long history, contemporary technologies such as eLearning and open educational resources promise to make it even more cost-effective today.