

# Quality, Standards and Globalization in Higher Education

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Keynote presentation to the biennial conference of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), Conference Centre, Dublin Castle, April 2003.

## Abstract

*Higher education, science, and technology have always been international endeavors, but have acquired new dimensions and features in recent years. This paper describe these features in terms of some key characteristics of American higher education – general education at the undergraduate level, organized graduate schools, and the expansion of the private sector. As these features spread through the world, they are accompanied by two drives that may seem contradictory – to deregulate higher education, and to create universal standards for the certification of competencies. In the end, the paper discusses some implications of these trends for the receiving countries.*

## The spreading of the Western canon

Since its inception, in the European Middle Ages, higher education has been an international endeavor, with students and scholars traveling to the old universities of Paris, Bologna, Salamanca, and Uppsala, teaching and learning similar contents, and using Latin as a common language. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western universities spread to other parts of the world, whether part of colonial enterprises, as in India, or by initiative of countries, as in Japan and in Latin America. The assumption was that modern science, professional education, and technology, as developed in the Western world, were universal assets that countries could only ignore at their own peril.

After the Second World War, as higher education expanded, international exchanges also intensified, fostered by the work of national and international cooperation agencies, private foundations, and national governments. Along the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, Germany, France, England and the United States, and for a period the Soviet Union, disputed the dominance of international higher education and scientific cooperation, attracting foreign students, sending their scholars abroad, and providing models and technical assistance for the creation or transformation of universities into modern institutions, according to what we could call, at the risk of over-simplification, the “Western canon”.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this secular trend persists, with three important peculiarities: the transformation of the classic universities into massive systems of higher education; the growing, worldwide dominance of the American model of higher education; and the transformation of science, technology and education into a large business sector, the “knowledge economy”. Underlying these three elements is the worldwide phenomena of globalization, characterized, among other things, by the growth of international trade, the breakdown of communication barriers, and the emergence of the United States as the world’s economic and military superpower.

In this presentation, I would like to make some comments on the interplay between these three elements, in the present context of globalization.

The adoption of Western models of higher education, scientific research, and technology in other parts of the world was always fraught with problems and tensions. Only a few, small countries were able to establish the Western canon in full, in the organization of their education and research institutions, and in the modernization of their economies. In other places, it led to the creation of small, westernized institutions coexisting with many others that, on the surface, adopted the trappings of Western universities, without however incorporating their values and culture. The hope was that, on time, the benefits of Western modernization would spread to society as a whole, and the tensions and differences between the “modern” and the “traditional” sectors would disappear. There were also alternative proposals, coming from intellectuals and political movements, to foster the development of local alternatives to the Western canon, based, for instance, on the Confucian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindi, or Pre-Colombian cultural and religious traditions, which could absorb the advances of Western science and technology without shattering the fabric of local cultures. It is fair to say, however, that

none of these attempts have succeeded very well. Modernity, with all its known difficulties and contradictions, seems to be here to stay.<sup>1</sup>

### **Mass higher education**

The transformation of the old elite universities into systems of mass higher education, and the growing importance of advanced technologies in industrial production and the provision of services, has led to a paradoxical and unexpected consequence, which was the weakening of what we are calling “the Western canon” within the Western countries themselves. In the 50s and 60s, it was still possible to expect that universal education would provide all citizens in a country with a modern scientific outlook, providing the foundations for the work of a competent elite of scientists, technologists, educators, entrepreneurs and political leaders, who would govern and lead society on their behalf, and with their cooperation. Today, most students in higher education are in the humanities and in the new service professions, like administration and communications. Science and technology became too complex and difficult for the common student to grasp, as many of them did on the heydays of *Popular Mechanics*; and careers in law, administration and communication became more attractive and accessible than those in the natural and biological sciences and professions. For many, in the United States as in many other countries, the choices between evolutionism and creationism, modern and alternative medicine, astrology and astronomy, are seen as matters of individual taste and choice, rather than a consequence of well grounded scientific understanding. The cultural gaps between elite and mass may be larger now than thirty or forty years ago, and this has very important political and social implications, which we could not possibly explore in this presentation.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the growth of mass higher education does not mean, necessarily, that we have more people well educated according to the Western canon than in the past; it can mean, quite simply, that we have more people studying longer. There is a widespread belief that we have entered a new, “knowledge economy,” which demands

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<sup>1</sup> José Joaquín Brunner. "Un espejo trizado: ensayos sobre cultura y políticas culturales." Santiago, Chile: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales. 1988

<sup>2</sup> Richard M. Merelman. "Technological cultures and liberal democracy in the United States." Pp. 167-194 in *Science, Technology & Human Values*, vol. 25. 2000

much higher levels of technical and scientific competence from the labor force, and this would explain the expansion of higher education in so many countries in the last few decades. The fact is, however, that the new technologies, by their very nature, depend on a limited number of persons with extremely high qualifications, which can produce in large scale for extended consumer markets, differently from older technologies, which required large numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers. The expansion of higher education, both in developed and developing countries, has more to do with the changing lifestyles of the young, and the economic value of education credentials in unstable and highly competitive job markets, than with the technical requirements of the knowledge economy.<sup>3</sup>

This new scenario creates two problems for policy makers in higher education. Should governments continue to support and finance the expansion of higher education indefinitely, on the assumption that, the more higher education a country gets, the better? Moreover, should governments try to set standards and care for the quality of higher education institutions?

The prevalent attitude is still to answer “yes” to both questions, but it is clear that this response is based on old assumptions about the role of higher education in modern societies, rather than on a proper understanding of the contemporary situation. This is not, however, a simple “yes” or “no” situation. Good quality higher education, including the development of research capabilities and scholarship, is more important than ever. It is the role of governments to make sure that there are institutions that can provide them, and that access to these resources is not biased in favor of special, privileged groups. At the same time, the provision of higher education today goes well beyond what is done in classic universities, and does not follow well-established and predictable patterns and cannons. Governments should probably refrain from supporting and trying to impose standards on all these activities, and let the markets to establish their own preferences, hierarchies and rules to a large degree. One difficulty with this proposal is that higher education is usually just one side of a coin that has, as the other

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<sup>3</sup> Alison Wolf. "Does education matter? myths about education and economic growth." London: Penguin. 2002. See, for Latin America, Simon Schwartzman. "Higher education and the demands of the new economy in Latin America. Background paper for the LAC Flagship Report." Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. 2002.

side, a regulated professional market. If there are rules establishing which credentials are necessary to be a medical doctor, a lawyer, an optometrist or a pharmacist, and who is entitled to teach in higher and secondary education, there should be also rules, regulations and standards to define how these credentials can be obtained. It is impossible, therefore, to deregulate higher education without deregulating also the job market, not only in the private sector, but also in the access to public jobs.

### **The adoption of the American model**

The so-called “American model” of higher education, which is gaining favor in so many parts of the world, brings three important novelties, which have a direct bearing on the issues of quality and standards.

Two of these novelties are closely associated: the creation of “graduate education,” in one extreme, and “undergraduate” education on the other. None of these entities existed until recently in Europe and in countries which adopted the European institutions, like in Latin America. In the European tradition, general education is done at the secondary level, and higher education institutions are meant to prepare the students for the professions. Those willing to do research or to teach at higher levels can present themselves to an exam, and obtain a doctor’s degree. The American “college,” or undergraduate level, is probably a historical compensation for the known quality problems of American high schools, but is also an appropriate response to the fact that, with mass higher education, only part of the students would ever go to work in a regulated, well-established profession. In the absence of this strong link between higher education and the professions, America was much freer than other countries in allowing undergraduate education to grow unregulated.

Education for the professions, in the United States, is part of graduate education, which includes another important innovation, the graduate schools for the education of university professors and researchers (in Europe and Latin America, this would be called “post-graduate education”). One advantage of these schools is that they are organized as teaching institutions, rather than just as certifying bodies, and can train many more people in less time. The second advantage is that, since these students will not go to the traditional professions, they will enter an academic job market that is mostly self-regulated, through scientific societies and related institutions.

The third American innovation is the spread of private higher education. There are several possible explanations for this, among them, historically, the relatively small size of federal and state governments in the US in relation to the private interests pushing for higher education. At first, these institutions grew without any kind of quality control and standards. Earlier in the century, however, through the pioneering work of Abraham Flexner, medical education in the US came into strong regulation and control, through the combined efforts of professional associations and government agencies, and other professions developed their own procedures for regulation and self-control.<sup>4</sup> Later, the higher education institutions felt the need to establish their own systems of quality control, leading to the creation of the existing associations of colleges and schools and their accrediting procedures. Work in science and technology, however, is regulated by the competitive rules of the academic market and high technology business firms, and do not require similar kinds of mechanisms.

There is, today, an enormous private market for education, which may be more difficult to see in countries where higher education is still provided by public institutions, but all too obvious in countries like the United States, Brazil or Japan, where the public sector became just one among other players in a large “knowledge industry”.

Private higher education can be of two types. The most traditional are the non-profit, philanthropic, religious or communitarian institutions. They are run privately, but destined to serve the common good, according to the interpretation of their holders. The others are run like any other for-profit enterprise, seeking to maximize revenues in the market for knowledge products and services. The frontiers between public and non-profit, and non-profit and for profit institutions are not well defined. Increasingly, public institutions are required to be cost-effective, and private institutions are required to respond to social needs, whether because of public regulations and incentives, or to increase their prestige and market share. In many countries, like Britain and Australia, public institutions are being stimulated or led to adopt the managerial practices of private institutions, and to go to the national and international markets to fight for resources in competition with the private sectors. In others, like in South Africa, there is

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Flexner. "Universities American, English, German." New York: Oxford University Press. 1968

growing concern that the expansion of private education would reduce the government's ability to make higher education to work for the country's common good, and infuse the students with values and attitudes that only foster their self-interests.<sup>5</sup>

### **The higher education global market – promises and risks**

The international diffusion of these three American innovations – general (or undergraduate) higher education, post-graduate education, and private ownership – add strength to the trends to increase the internationalization of higher education at all levels.

Post-graduate education has been internationalized for a long time, with thousands of students from all over the world converging to the main universities in the United States, Britain and France for their masters and doctoral degrees, with support coming from their own governments, international organizations, philanthropic institutions, and private resources. For the receiving countries, foreign students can be an economic boon, and the source of high quality, cheap skilled labor. For the sending countries, it all depends on their ability to tap the knowledge and competence generated by this interchange. If they have the means, they can use the foreign experience to develop their internal capabilities, and to develop profitable links with advanced high technology and research centers. If they do not, study abroad can be an open channel for brain drain, which is particularly damaging when the sending country pays for the students' previous education, and supply them with scholarships to go abroad.

There is a new trend, however, which is the international expansion of lower levels of higher education – master's programs, professional and general education – and the transference of institutions, or their know-how, from the most developed to the less developed countries. Different from the few old, "expatriate" institutions that have existed in the past, institutions participating in this trend tend to be for-profit, and compete for students with the existing institutions in the targeted countries. To do so, they have either to adjust to the local rules and regulations, or to strive to reduce local

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<sup>5</sup> See for South Africa, Glenda Kruss and André Kraak. "Understanding private higher education in South Africa (Special issue of *Perspectives in Education*, vol. 20, 4)." Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. 2002.

restrictions, making the countries more amenable and open to the international flow of education services.

It is possible to identify two opposite, but complementary effects of this globalization trend: one to deregulate, and the other to establish equal, internationally compatible rules and standards for the regulation of national higher education systems. In principle, international higher education services could expand either if there were no regulations, or if the rules and regulations – including the rules for certification, the recognition of degrees, and professional privileges associated with them – were homogeneous. In practice, there is a growing market for internationalization and expansion in the segments of undergraduate and research segments that are already unregulated, and in specialized training associated with business (as, for example, in the expanding universe of corporate universities). The introduction of education as one of the service industries to be deregulated through the World Trade Organization's General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS) dramatizes the first trend.<sup>6</sup> The other trend is related to a broader effort to develop international, comparative standards and information in many areas, from statistical data to accounting procedures, being stimulated by international organizations and multilateral agencies, such as OECD and the United Nations.

In the European Union, it is now possible for professionals to move from country to country, and the questions of mutual recognition of degrees is of great importance and urgency; in this context, the flow of education services and the internationalization of higher education institutions is a natural consequence. Elsewhere, including the Mercosur group in South America, work mobility is still restrained, and the issue is much less salient. In these situations, the main stakeholders for liberalization or the internationalization of standards are not likely to be the students or governments, but the institutions willing to expand their global markets for education services.

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the implications of GATS for higher education, see International Association of Universities. 2003. "GATS (WTO) and Higher Education 'Commodification' – the Shape of Things to Come?" <http://www.unesco.org/iau/globalization/wto-gats.html> May 23



Is this good or bad for the recipient countries? There is no simple answer to this question. It would be naïve to believe that, by itself, the new globalization of higher education would do necessarily better for the recipient countries than the previous waves of expansion of the Western canon. On the positive side, international institutions can bring new standards, methodologies, teaching materials and practices that could improve local higher education, providing students with learning experiences and opportunities they would not have otherwise, and breaking down artificial barriers to access to higher education. But they can also have negative effects, by creating additional, unneeded layers of status and prestige, by selling prestigious but empty credentials, and by undermining national efforts for quality control.

Here as elsewhere, the potential and negative effects of globalization depend on each country's ability to make the existing resources work to the benefit of their population. To close down the country to foreign influences and opportunities for international cooperation would not only be foolish, but also impossible to do. It is also naïve to expect that the private sector, national or international, would be able to replace national governments in the provision of high quality higher education and research, and in the attention to the problems of social equity and access.

It is up to each country to decide how regulated or unregulated their education and professional markets will be, and how much space they should open to internationalization. Higher education is likely to remain, in the years to come, an area in which different sectors, public and private, national and international, philanthropic and for profit, will have to coexist, learning from each other, and, hopefully, improving by mutual fertilization and emulation.

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