



Missing from UNESCO's Roadmap for the Future: The Research Mission of Universities

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Does UNESCO think that the traditional research mission of universities is relevant in the twenty-first century? Apparently not. *Beyond Limits: New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education*, the roadmap proposed for the World Higher Education Conference, which recently concluded in Barcelona, Spain, only very marginally and mostly indirectly mentions the research mission. Downplaying, or indeed almost entirely forgetting, the university's role in research is a huge lapse—and does not serve science, scholarship, or the future of higher education well. Nor is much said about several other central issues for higher education—among them financing the academic enterprise and the burgeoning private higher education sector. Another lapse is internationalization—which is included, but the emphasis is almost exclusively on mobility, recognition of qualifications and partnerships, with no reference to internationalization of the curriculum at home or global learning for all. Emphasizing higher education as a public good and human right sounds nice, but seems rather naïve when it ignores two key themes: massification, resulting in a rising private sector; and the knowledge economy, resulting on the one hand in increased inequality and on the other in the increased need for research. On the positive side, much else is usefully highlighted—academic freedom, sustainability, a holistic student learning experience, inclusiveness, diversity,

Abstract

The 2022 UNESCO Roadmap for the Future only marginally mentions research—while this is a central mission of universities. It is entirely appropriate for most universities to focus mainly on teaching and applied service to society and the economy. Yet, while research-intensive universities are only a small minority worldwide, they are immensely important to global science and innovation. Their function and role do not deserve to be ignored by UNESCO.

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and other worthwhile and important themes. What is also positive is the call for more research on, and innovation in, higher education associated with capacity development.

It is worth reminding UNESCO, and perhaps the global higher education community in general, that research, especially basic research, has been a central responsibility of universities since the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810. Traditionally, the core functions of the modern university are teaching, research, and service. UNESCO seems to have forgotten about the importance of research. This is particularly problematic in the science-based world of the twenty-first century, which includes the centrality of the university in the social sciences and humanities, key to understanding culture and society and providing the social context of the hard sciences.

As *Beyond Limits* illustrates, the contemporary university has been asked to take on ever more responsibilities, often in an environment of decreased resources. Governments, the media, and others are constantly asking academia to “reinvent itself” to serve these manifold purposes, in many ways moving an institution that has been remarkably successful over centuries away from its core responsibilities. Ignoring the importance of research in this process is dangerous: The global challenges threatening our societies, emphasized in the UNESCO declaration, require on the contrary increased attention on, and resources devoted to, research and research collaboration.

The Complexity of the Research Function

The contribution of universities to research production and to the advancement of science and society is unquestionable, and is crucial in basic research. One of many illustrations of this contribution is the development and advancement of mRNA vaccine technology, which led to the rapid success of COVID-19 vaccines. The Nobel prize-winning scientists who did the basic research were based in universities and research institutes—and their discoveries were the basis of the applied technology used for the vaccines. There are endless additional examples.

Universities are the central drivers of research, but, in some countries, they are not the only homes of research. China, France, Germany, Russia, and some other countries have separate, publicly funded research institutions, which are increasingly collaborating or even merging with universities. In the era of massification, not all universities are research focused. Indeed, only a small number of universities, the majority in the Global North, are research intensive. In the United States, there are perhaps 300 universities that are seriously engaged in research. In Australia, the Group of Eight are research intensive, and the United Kingdom has its “Russell Group.” It is entirely appropriate for most universities and most academics to be focused mainly on teaching and applied service to society and the economy. Yet, the “world class” research-intensive universities, although being only a small minority, are immensely important to global science and innovation. Their function and role in the global knowledge system do not deserve to be entirely ignored by UNESCO.

Given UNESCO's traditional emphasis on the Global South and the role of education in socioeconomic development, attention should have been paid to the role of research universities and building research capacity in that region, to serve local needs and break the dominance of the North in that respect.

Research and research-intensive universities are central to higher education and, crucially, to the future of society and the survival of the planet. ▲

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This article was previously published in University World News, June 4, 2022.