

Sustainability and Affordability: Is There a Magic Bullet?

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The transformation in the higher education landscape worldwide has been nothing less than dramatic. Underpinning these developments has been the remarkable growth in demand for higher education. When the first issue of *International Higher Education* was published, there were approximately 68 million tertiary students enrolled worldwide. Today, there are 196 million students with estimates of almost 430 million by 2030. Over the same time frame, the enrollment rate for 20–29 year-olds in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries has grown by 10 percentage points on average, with some countries (notably Denmark, Finland, Greece, and Iceland) enrolling more than 40 percent. As restructuring of the global-labor market continues apace, people will spend more time in education. All this illustrates that we are moving rapidly to becoming high participation societies, where the vast majority of the population is educated to advanced levels, because of the significance for social and personal achievement.

Yet, ironically, at the moment our societies are increasingly dependent upon an educated citizenry, the costs associated with being an active player in the global economy are also rising. While some countries can expand or at least maintain their expenditure, others are under severe pressure from public and private debt and a public critical of high(er) taxation and expansive public services. This is leading to situations in which expenditure per student is not keeping pace with expanding demand. Overall, the OECD (in 2013) says the share of the total cost covered by public funds for higher education has declined from 77 percent in 1995 to 68 percent in 2013.

Nothing that I have said here will be new to this audience. However, providing high-quality universal higher education at a time of decreasing public funding and escalating global competitiveness is the most important challenge facing us in the coming two decades.

Using global rankings to guide us will inevitably lead to increased inequality. The top 100 universities represent less than 0.5 percent of the current total of almost 18,000 higher education institutions. This in turn represents approximately 0.4 percent of total-tertiary students worldwide. As demand grows, selectivity is accelerating. This

is because while overall student numbers are increasing, student numbers among the top 100 are relatively stable. Thus, each year, top rankings represent a decreasing overall percentage of the total number of students.

Some countries have sought to balance these demands by seeking to raise quality by concentrating resources, in a few “world-class universities,” in the expectation that the benefits will trickle down to others. A minority of countries, such as Finland, have pursued a “world-class system” strategy, spreading the benefits of excellence equitably across its vast landmass, while ranking among one of the top-performing countries in the world.

What is the appropriate balance between educating the majority of our citizens, to be smart, creative, and entrepreneurial individuals, while ensuring the ability of the nation to compete in world science? Have we reached the end of the current model of mass public higher education? ■

Moving from Soft Power to Knowledge Diplomacy

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International higher education, in its role as a political actor, is strongly attracted to the concept of soft power. Developed by Joseph Nye about a decade ago, soft power is popularly understood as the ability to influence others and achieve national self-interest(s) through attraction and persuasion rather, than through coercion, military force, or economic sanctions—commonly known as hard power.

Many academics hail soft power as a fundamental premise of today’s international education engagement. Common examples of soft power in higher education include the Fulbright Program, British Council activities, German Academic Exchange initiatives, Erasmus Mundus projects, and others. Clearly, these are respected and long-standing programs that make enormous contributions.

But why do we call them instruments of “soft power,” when at their heart they promote exchange of students, faculty, culture, science, knowledge, and expertise. Yes, there are self-interests at play, but there is a mutuality of interests and benefits involved for all partners. International higher education is not traditionally seen as a game of winners and