

Higher education institutions must develop specific programs to guarantee not only the access but the success of every student, reducing the failure and dropouts rates. This must be done without compromises to the quality of the final degree awarded.

Countries must implement policies that provide access to education for socially and economically disadvantaged sectors; that establish and insure robust-quality assurance and monitoring processes; and that create a framework to encourage institutional diversity and innovative, equitable funding mechanisms. It is difficult to imagine a comprehensive solution, but each different country must try to find a good balance between funding, access, and quality in this complicated wrangle. A long-term, sustainable solution for the growth of the higher education sector is mandatory for the economic and social stability of any nation. ■

Do Not Fall For It

DANIEL C. LEVY

Daniel C. Levy is a State University of New York Distinguished Professor, University at Albany, New York. E-mail: dlevy@albany.edu.

Zaniness is required to try to answer a question about higher education's greatest imminent need, so I consult and paraphrase comedian Groucho Marx: "A four-year-old child could answer this question. Run out and find me a four-year-old child, I can't make head or tail out of it." Or maybe I could escape by discrediting the question, or at least declaring it unanswerable? But those might be ungracious responses to a gracious invitation. Most of us are interested in the answers given by colleagues who have spent their professional lives studying higher education.

Does the question's reference, to what higher education needs to deal with, concern higher education's self-interests or serving others? Only the likes of university presidents and magical solution policypushers can present these interests as nearly identical. Also, how could any answer make sense across the hugely varied realities of societies, political systems, economies, levels of development, interests, and values on the one hand and of higher education structures and functions on the other? However, many colleagues may answer with research universities in mind. I could not be comfortable with a singular substantive and prescriptive action answer for all of higher education.

Higher education's biggest need is to steer clear of, or significantly modify, seductively attractive idealistic visions or policy proposals. Obviously, we want to resist insidious or meritless proposals; when they are imposed on us, we go

kicking and screaming. But even the visions and proposals, which have alluring merit and should be seriously considered, come our way with vastly exaggerated claims of likely benefits. In some places, between no and inadequate allowance for the myriad costs, those that can be anticipated and those that cannot be. Compose your own list from yesteryear and today. Unfortunately, yesteryear's inflated claims remain—what increased funding of higher education will do for development, how rapid and diversified expansion of access will bring equity and productive benefits, how government money will achieve mutually held progressive aims. These claims are now joined by grand visions of how to build world-class universities and what will be reaped from quality-assurance agencies, benchmarks, massive open line courses, or increased market competition.

This is not an ivory-tower rant against outsiders. My answer holds for bold visions and proposals springing from inside academia, including from higher education studies experts. I would trust more to invisible hands—in which I have only limited trust—than to prescriptions from gurus, let alone from wise-guys outside academia, to determine what higher education needs to do. ■

Sustaining Resources

SIMON MARGINSON

Simon Marginson is professor at the Institute of Education, University College London, UK. E-mail: s.marginson@ioe.ac.uk.

The key challenge facing higher education in the next decade is mundane but central: sustaining resources. Behind that lies a deeper historic problem, relations between higher education and the nation state.

Worldwide modern higher education systems are the product of the nation-building strategies of governments. Tuition arrangements vary markedly, but overall, up till now, government has funded most of the infrastructure and most of the operating costs of better institutions in one way or another. Governments subsidize the growth of access to newly participating families and foster opportunities for social mobility through higher education. Government is also essential to funding research, a public good subject to market failure. However, matters are now changing in many countries. Research still depends on public funding, and governments want to concentrate resources there to maximize national competitiveness. But teaching can be either public or private good.