

Quality: More Complicated Than Ever

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Quality education used to be so simple—carefully select qualified students, provide them with content in an academic area, and award a diploma to reflect an acceptable level of knowledge and performance. Changing realities have muddied the meaning and measure of quality.

Gross enrollment ratios have increased nearly everywhere. Although this is a good thing for developed and developing countries alike, expanded enrollments inevitably mean enrolling students with wide-ranging prior preparation. In most cases, universities are presented with huge gaps in knowledge and skills that impede academic success. Institutions must either allocate resources for remedial instruction—with limited promise since the deficiencies accumulated over 12 years are not easily remedied; lower performance expectations; or accept high attrition rates. Each strategy has implications for institutional quality.

Financial pressures on higher education are increasing. Where higher education is provided at public institutions at low, or no cost, enrollment capacity is limited. This has led the expansion of a “demand-absorbing” private sector, with a growing for-profit subsector. Private institutions are dependent on fees paid by students and their families. The need to fill classrooms to cover costs or (often) to generate profit risks to compromise the quality of both students and instruction in the interest of financial goals.

As international qualities have become a factor in how institutions are perceived and compared, many universities are taking shortcuts, paying third parties to enhance their international dimension and produce measurable results quickly. Greater international enrollment has also become an important source of income. Allowing third-party actors to have a significant role in institutional management has opened the door to substandard, as well as unethical activity.

The purpose of higher education has also become more confused. There is a growing expectation that a university education is a guarantee of future employment and that if a university graduate is unemployed, the education provided was of poor quality.

Universities are being pressed to produce more research to improve placement in international rankings, at the same time that professors are being pushed to demonstrate impact on students through clearly defined “learning

outcomes.” Increased pressure on faculty coincides with fewer tenured or secure positions, more part-time professors, and limited infrastructure to help develop the capacity to deliver on these augmented expectations.

So, the question remains—what is university quality? Should all institutions be expected to enroll a diverse student body, insure that they all rise to a comparable level of demonstrable performance—while the faculty produces internationally indexed publications, assures learning outcomes and assures employment to all graduates, all with smaller budgets? As always, quality means different things to various people. The complex realities that surround higher education today demand to build an ever stronger case for aligning measures of quality with institutional mission. If universities are going to produce “quality,” however, it is defined: politicians, employers, and parents must criticize less and assume some responsibility for financing and otherwise supporting the necessary means to meet their expectations.

Some Nonpecuniary Challenges to Research Universities

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An answer is based on the question limited to research universities—the institutions that emphasize research, undergraduate and graduate instruction, and the arts, sciences, and professional schools. Higher education is not sustainable without schools of this type.

More than anything else, the quality of research universities depends on two closely related factors: academic freedom and shared governance, a suggestion made by me in these pages, quite recently. How are university leaders, faculty, and students selected? Does the government enforce limitations on certain types of scholarship or scholarly point of view? Who has a voice in determining curriculum and research directions? In China, the Communist Party may condemn excessive Western influence in teaching and research; in much of the Arab world fundamentalist religion prevents women from contributing their talents to society; in the United States it may be legislatures and occa-

sionally donors that attempt to bypass priorities, developed internally and on academic grounds, etc. I have never seen an outstanding research university that does not enjoy academic freedom or a form of shared governance.

One has to be clear. I am in no way implying that all people who share in governance should be university insiders; but internal academic voices need to be heard and considered. It should also be stressed that academic freedom—the freedom of teachers and students to teach, study, and pursue knowledge without unreasonable interference—is not the same thing as political freedom, although they are practically twins. The ever-present challenges are obvious.

Twenty years is not a very long time, and one can assume that the intellectual climate will not be subject to abrupt change. And that introduces another predictable challenge: professionalism and/or an increasing anti-intellectualism. In the United States, and elsewhere also, I am referring to the view that learning for its own sake is somehow a frivolous activity—perhaps a luxury and not deserving of support. From the point of view of the student, the purpose of education is job and career. That is how curriculum is frequently structured—accounting: Yes; computer science: a shouted Yes; Shakespeare: if there is a little spare time. From the point of view of the state what matters are “human resources to meet workforce needs.” Basic science needs support because the study of biology may lead to a cure of some disease, especially the diseases that afflict funders. There is some truth in all of these propositions, but why does it also imply that sociology is quite useless and that the humanities are not deserving of support?

I am, of course, familiar with the more standard challenges to higher education: disruption caused by technology, high cost, massive open online courses making residential education a useless indulgence, and others. I do not dispute their great importance, but I add disinterested learning—for undergraduates we would call it liberal education—because it is only rarely mentioned. Yet, fundamental intellectual progress has most often started with disinterested investigators attempting to solve a problem, because it is fascinating and has not been done before. In the social sciences and humanities where problems are very rarely solved in definitive form, each generation of students and teachers needs its own reinterpretation of the big questions asked by these fields of study and investigation. These endeavors are the intellectual essence of research universities. ■

“Intelligent Internationalization”: A 21st Century Imperative

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One of the most important issues facing higher education around the world for the next two decades is the crucial need for “intelligent internationalization.”

Internationalization—as a response to globalization, as a strategy for enhanced quality or visibility, or as an isomorphic response to developments in the environment—is arguably one of the most significant phenomena, currently affecting higher education institutions across the globe. Internationalization may be seen as both a cause and an effect of the advent of the global knowledge economy. To varying degrees across national and institutional contexts, it is also the manifestation of fundamental—and still evolving—changes in the way we think about what constitutes relevant, high-quality tertiary education today.

Mobility is still “king” in most internationalization discussions, and growing student mobility numbers worldwide indicate that mobility will continue to be highly significant for the foreseeable future. However, in many countries, crucially important aspects of the internationalization agenda are now moving from the periphery to the center, in matters of both policy and practice. We see this clearly in the long-overdue, rising prominence of the discussion around “internationalization at home,” the increasing importance placed by universities on developing and sustaining international partnerships of both breadth and depth, and growing interest in providing more internationally and interculturally oriented training and support for faculty and staff.

Meanwhile, these developments are unfolding against a backdrop of unprecedented complexity and flux for higher education, more broadly. Political, economic, and social developments are exerting enormous pressures on higher education to (among other things) “perform,” “respond,” “innovate,” “incubate,” “evaluate,” and “lead.” The internationalization agenda is deeply implicated in these processes. Dealing effectively with this complexity requires a commitment to “intelligent internationalization,” which is grounded in a body of knowledge that coherently encompasses both theory and practice aimed at improving our understanding of the complex realities of internationalization locally and globally. It demands a commitment to the train-