

The Brave New (and Smaller) World of Higher Education: A Transatlantic View

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An Unholy Trinity

During the last decade, technology, globalization, and competition have caused the ground to shift under higher education, defying national borders and calling into question honored traditions and long-held assumptions—creating a brave new world for higher education.

Many believe that higher education worldwide is in the midst of the early stages of a revolution created by technology. Whether it increases access for underserved students, promotes lifelong learning, or improves teaching and learning, technology's effects are already profound in Europe and North America. More than 2,000 U.S. institutions offer on-line courses. In Canada, about 500,000 students (out of a population of more than 6 million) were doing part of their coursework through various distance learning mechanisms. Technology also has a powerful effect on how institutions function in the marketplace. No longer will rivals be located in neighboring towns. Students can choose among institutions around the world. The emerging European credit system may make student mobility and transfer as common in Europe as it is in North America. Technology is reshaping pedagogy and teaching, calling into question traditional beliefs about the role of the professor. It is also spurring the development of new institutional offices and requiring innovations concerning strategy and resource allocation.

Globalization is a tricky term. For some, it connotes the free flow of ideas, capital, people, and goods around the world. For others, it implies the hegemony of the capitalist system, the domination of rich nations and corporations, and the loss of national identity and culture. Although many predict that the amount of instruction delivered in English will increase around the world, not all view this growth as a threat to national cultures and languages. Indeed, some even see real benefits, such as enabling “small-language” countries, such as the Netherlands and Norway, to be active

international players. Ironically, the growth of English may be most dangerous to American students, who often see the dominance of their language as a disincentive to develop foreign-language competency, thus reinforcing their chronic monolingualism and narrow world views.

Globalization has also underscored the imperative for institutions to internationalize. Internationalization poses a major challenge to higher education systems on both sides of the Atlantic, but Europe has clearly made a significantly greater commitment to meeting it than Canada or the United States—with its Bologna framework and EU-sponsored programs, such as ERASMUS and SOCRATES.

As globalization grows, so does concern about the growing competition in the worldwide higher education marketplace. Student demand drives competition on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, and to some extent in Canada, the concept of student as consumer is well established. In contrast, the domination of publicly supported institutions throughout Europe and of centralized policies governing student enrollment patterns in some European countries has historically minimized interinstitutional competition. This is changing, however, as European policymakers pursue options that encourage competition and as institutions move to a comparable three-year first degree, allowing students to enjoy greater flexibility and more choices at home and abroad. Additionally, on both sides of the Atlantic, new players, such as Microsoft and Novell, have ridden the technology wave into tertiary education, offering alternatives for students seeking advanced training and education. Competition is also emerging over academic staff. The aging of the professoriate, compounded by continued expansion of postsecondary education increases the need for faculty hiring. In Canada, one-third of faculty members are 55 years of age or older, and half are between 40 and 54 years. In some European countries, the challenge is not simply one of population projections, for many scholars have left the country or abandoned the academy for more lucrative jobs.

New Responses

This environment of increased demands, heightened competition, and complex challenges makes it extremely difficult for any institution to have sufficient resources and know-how to “go it alone.” To enhance their capacities universities worldwide are forming partnerships with other institutions in the same country, with institutions in other countries, and with other kinds of organizations. Research collaboration—particularly with corporate partners but also among universities—is a well-established feature of North American higher education. Such collaboration is also growing rapidly in

Europe, where it is strongly encouraged by the EU Research Framework Program. For universities, these alliances can identify important research problems and provide expanded opportunities and support for academic staff and students, particularly through internships and work experience, as well as the necessary resources. They help get ideas to market, add visibility to university research, develop corporate advocates, and spur economic growth.

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A more recent type of partnership centers on instruction, which allows partners to create programs that they cannot offer alone. For example, U.S. institutions use consortia to provide instruction in less commonly taught languages. Traditional university-corporate instructional partnerships provide on-site training and education of corporate employees by a local college or university. Other types of instructional alliances are also emerging. Eleven higher education institutions in Denmark and Sweden have jointly developed Øresund University, a coordinating institution to create a cross-border learning region from both countries—countries that were recently connected by an extensive tunnel and bridge project. A smaller-scale example is the two-year master’s degree in leadership jointly created and offered by Princeton and Oxford Universities. UNext, an American firm, is partnering with universities in the United States and Europe to develop and deliver nondegree courses to corporate customers.

Internationalization is another institutional response on both sides of the Atlantic. Eighty-four percent of Canadian institutions reported in 1999 that internationalization was part of their university-wide strategy. In Europe, the proximity of neighboring countries and the economic imperatives of a mobile and multilingual workforce have fueled institutional initiatives to internationalize. Internationalization is squarely on the table in Europe, with impressive financial support from the European Union. Europe’s ministers of education are committed to enhancing the mobility and exchange of students, academics, and graduates; increasing the international attractiveness of their higher education systems; and developing joint degrees and coordinated curriculum planning.

The third response, one that separates Europe from North America, is a policy framework that promotes change and guides action. The Bologna Declaration aims to organize and coordinate European higher education while respecting national differences and priorities. The changes outlined in the declaration include the widespread adoption of a binary, or two-tiered, curriculum of undergraduate and graduate education and the implementation of a comparable credit system. Although the Bologna Declaration is an important driver, it is part of a larger European ethos regarding the development of a united continent. In contrast to their European counterparts, American and Canadian academic leaders see change as largely an institutional matter and tended to view policy as an intrusion on institutional autonomy and an impediment. National or supranational postsecondary policy frameworks do not exist in either country, and state and provincial policies vary tremendously.

Conclusion

In a fast-changing world, the temptation is to meet immediate challenges rather than to address long-term changes that demand difficult choices. However, short-sightedness presents serious dangers. Can universities make sense of it all and make the necessary changes or will they be tossed around by the tide of immediacy? If they are simply surfing the present, they indeed risk losing their ability to serve as both critic of society and as partner in its development. Can institutions worldwide balance the pressing issues of the day with the longer view necessary to make key contributions to the public good?

What are higher education’s fundamental values?

Will they find satisfactory answers to fundamental and vexing questions—such as, what are higher education’s fundamental values and how can they be reinterpreted in today’s changing environment? How can institutions find equilibrium between autonomy and responsiveness, and between the state as a partner, consumer, and regulator? Finally, how can institutions become sufficiently agile to adapt to the rapidly changing environment without losing their intellectual souls?

Author’s note. This article is based on a paper capturing the dialogue among 30 leaders of North American and European universities. The longer paper can be downloaded from the website of the American Council on Education (<<http://www.acenet.edu/bookstore>>).

