

International Education: Alternatives to the Market

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The widespread assumption that academic mobility and international education are “good things” may need to be tested periodically—to ensure, first, that the lessons of mass higher education at home have been fully incorporated into concepts of international education; and second, that the even more important lessons of globalization have been factored into policies for international education. It may be insufficient simply to define international education as a mass activity, characterized by mass flows between countries and continents or large-scale student flows as one of the most dramatic examples of globalization. It is still rare for international education to be discussed on the basis of the growing tide of economic migrants and asylum seekers or on the new information and communications technologies that have, in effect, “abolished” centuries-old ideas of time and space.

Mass Higher Education

Mass higher education systems, with almost open access, are now the dominant types in almost all advanced societies, as well as the increasing emphasis on considerations of social equity and economic utility. As a result, traditional academic and scientific cultures have been eroded, as more and more study takes

place off campus in the community, in the workplace, and in people's homes. Likewise, research (or, more broadly, knowledge production) has moved out of the library and the laboratory and become a highly distributed activity. Most higher education systems have not simply experienced quantitative growth (in the number of students and institutions) but in addition a qualitative revolution, in terms of values and of ethos. The whole *habitus* of higher education is changing. It has become a social, as much as an academic, enterprise; or, conversely, it has become part of the knowledge-services industry—the supply chain of the knowledge economy, producing highly skilled workers and useful knowledge.

Student Demography

One of the most obvious changes has dealt with the demography of students. Modern higher education systems now have mass-student populations, ranging from at least a third to more than half of the relevant age groups. The fact that access to higher education—and especially to elite universities—is still socially unequal should not be allowed to disguise the scale of the social transformation in higher education. Students are now much more representative of the wider community. They are no longer an elite group, differentiated from the mass of the population. This change of the social base of higher education, of course, reflects the wider transformation in European societies over the past half century—for example, the erosion of older class-based differences, partly as a result of greater social mobility; the decline of traditional “proletarian” industry; and the mass-media culture that embraces us all. A particularly striking aspect of

this social transformation is the revolution in gender relations and the status of women. Most societies have become much more open and more fluid.

However, the status of international students tends to be different. They are more likely to come from more privileged backgrounds than home students. Many also come from societies that have resisted the deep democratization of Europe (as opposed to the shallow democratization of mass-media culture, global brands, and the rest). For some, their experience of studying abroad is a reinforcement of an already privileged status, although for a minority that experience may also have a radicalizing effect. In some cases their societies, while embracing economic modernization and the most-advanced technologies, have resisted what they see as the social liberalization, even the moral chaos, of the West. As a result, there are often radically different articulations between higher education and society with respect to home and international students.

Intellectual Base

The intellectual base of higher education has been transformed as well as its social base. In teaching, problem-based learning and new forms of project-based assessment are now common. All these things are very familiar to home students. But the expectations of many international students—and, even more so, of their parents and others who fund them—can be rather different. They tend to favor more traditional patterns of teaching over more open styles of learning. Some may even associate these more open styles with the alleged moral chaos of the West. They also tend to study a different range of subjects—more likely engineering, computing, and business and management and less likely the humanities and the more critical social sciences. As a result divergence may exist

between more open learning and critical subjects, preferred by home students, and more traditional teaching and professional subjects favored by international students. A further difference is that the recruitment of international students is typically a market game, while the admission of home students is still much regarded as a public good. These dissonances may prove that the optimistic view needs to be revised of the expansion of national higher education systems and the growth of international education, both as aspects of a powerful form of liberalization. A better description may be of rival forms of liberalization, the social liberalization characteristic of mass-democratic higher education, and the economic free market in higher education that affects international education.

Globalization

With regard to mass higher education, too little may be made of its connections—or lack of connections—with, and implications for, international education. In the case of globalization it is possible that too much is made of these connections. At times, a simplistic relationship can be assumed: globalization is an irresistible force and the advance of international education is part of that irresistible force. Little consideration is given to the possibility that globalization is not necessarily such an irresistible force (at any rate in its neoliberal manifestation) or that its connection with international education is best seen as an epiphenomenon of globalization. There is a tendency to concentrate on this single path of development for globalization—in other words, that the inevitable trajectory is toward free-market capitalism, mass-media culture, global brands, and multiparty democracy. In fact, there are

several forms of globalization, and the future is much more open than the single-path theory suggests.

Even the single-path view of globalization is more complex than it appears at first sight. For some people, globalization offers great opportunities, to pursue global careers; or, if not global careers, to have their still predominantly national careers enhanced by a significant global added-value dimension. For other people, of course, globalization may mean imposed economic migration, the destabilizing of familiar communities and stable societies, and even separation from families and friends. For some institutions, especially the most successful universities in the West, the trend offers equally glittering opportunities—new research collaborations with like-minded universities in other countries, the prestige of global-university league tables (as an extension of national institutional hierarchies perhaps eroded by progressive social policies), an alternative income stream if state funding is constrained, and even a new model of entrepreneurialism extendable to the rest of the university. For other institutions, of course, globalization is a threat: their academic vitality is sucked out as their most-promising researchers move abroad and their institutional norms (even their national values) are called into question, as teams from various global agencies prescribe market policies and proscribe alternative strategies. These structural inequalities of free-market globalization will remain even if the winners and losers change. These structural inequalities are bred in its bone, part of globalization's DNA.

There is no single globalization with its centers of power among gleaming corporate skyscrapers in world cities. With many forms of globalization, some violently clash. For example, there are many forms of resistance to free-market

globalization—for example, the worldwide environmental movements (and other social movements) that are becoming an increasingly powerful force even in old politics. The global networks that have been developed by these new movements are at least both as dense and sophisticated as those of global capitalism. Yet, at times a profound unease rises about establishing connections between alternative forms of globalization and international education (and academic mobility), despite the fact that internationally mobile students (and staff) play a key role in developing these new global social movements and forms of political action. Perhaps this role is at least as significant as pious assertions about promoting better international understanding or selfish arguments about the contribution of international mobility to the global knowledge economy. It may also be a role that relates much better to the core critical values of the university. An urgent need exists to engage more actively with alternative globalizations and in the process to forge a deeper understanding of international education.