

## Sustainability and Affordability: Is There a Magic Bullet?

ELLEN HAZELKORN

*Ellen Hazelkorn is policy advisor to the Higher Education Authority (Ireland) and director, Higher Education Policy Research Unit, Dublin Institute of Technology. E-mail: ellen.hazelkorn@dit.ie.*

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? ■

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## Moving from Soft Power to Knowledge Diplomacy

JANE KNIGHT

*Jane Knight is adjunct professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada. E-mail: janeknight@utoronto.ca.*

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

losers—it focuses on exchange and builds on the respective strengths of institutions and countries. Importantly, it recognizes that benefits will differ among partners and countries.

In our highly interdependent world, higher education facilitates the cross-border flow and the exchange of people, knowledge, values, innovation, economy, technology, and culture. But why is it framed in a “power paradigm” like soft power? Are the values of self-interest, competition, or dominance going to effectively address issues of worldwide epidemics, terrorism, failed states, the bottom billion in poverty and climate change? The answer is no. This is based on the reality that solutions to worldwide challenges cannot be achieved by one country alone.

An alternative to the power paradigm is the framework of diplomacy. Diplomacy, interpreted as the management of international relations, focuses on negotiation, mediation, collaboration, compromise, and facilitation. These are different tactics and concepts than those attached to power dominance, authority, command, and control. Is knowledge diplomacy more appropriate to frame the role of higher education in international relations, than the soft power paradigm?

Knowledge is a cornerstone of today’s interconnected world. The evolution from the new information and communication technologies of *cyberspace*, to the big data of *infospace*, to the knowledge processing of *knowspace* brings new opportunities and complexities to international higher education. However, there is no denying that knowledge can also lead to power imbalances within and among countries. This reality is exacerbated when higher education and knowledge are seen as tools of soft power. The alternative of using collaboration and mediation strategies of diplomacy requires serious consideration.

International higher education has the opportunity of moving beyond its preoccupation, with the knowledge economy, and takes a proactive role to ensure that knowledge is effectively used to address worldwide challenges and inequalities, by recognizing the mutuality of interests and benefits. Is higher education ready to take a lead in promoting the notion of knowledge diplomacy and not remain stuck, in the soft power frame of self-interest and dominance?

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## Sustaining Quality and Massification: Is It Possible?

MARCELO KNOBEL

*Marcelo Knobel is professor at the Instituto de Física Gleb Wataghin, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp), Campinas, SP, Brazil. knobel@ifi.unicamp.br.*

Higher education has experienced rapid expanding enrollment worldwide for the last 40 years. This growth will probably continue for the next 20 years, with predictions of 400 million students in 2030 (compared with 100 million in 2000). Is it possible to make this massification more equitable, while insuring minimum standards of quality?

Different countries and regions of the world are at different stages of higher education development. Gross enrollment ratios depend on a nation’s degree of economic development, social environment, history, and policy priorities. While many countries still struggle to guarantee access to higher education for a predominantly young population, other countries face the challenges of an aging population and/or decrease of government support.

In the case of Latin America, for example, all countries still struggle with strong-social inequality. Increasing participation and degree attainment at the tertiary level are not only fundamental for forthcoming development but also key to social mobility, particularly for underrepresented groups—disadvantaged socioeconomic sectors, Afrodescendants, and indigenous people. There has been progress in the region in terms of student enrollments, growing from 1.6 million students in 1970 to 20 million in 2009. The gross enrollment ratio is around 30 percent in the region, indicating that there is yet room to further growth. In addition, growth remains uneven, mainly favoring certain segments of the population.

The funding sources of higher education—governments, students, and families, or for-profit ventures—has a strong influence on the quality provided. For example, there are many concerns regarding higher education quality, when it is focused on financial return. Unfortunately, the appetite for short-term financial gain often distracts attention from long-term planning, leading to a lack of investment in infrastructure, faculty qualifications, and program stability, and thus jeopardizing quality. Additionally, although the for-profit sector has had an important “demand-absorbing” role, these institutions are often given too much latitude by national authorities for the quality of services they provide.

Finally, massification inevitably presents the challenge of teaching a more diverse group, increasing the share of students with substantial gaps in their previous education.