Excellence in higher education is as old as university, but nowadays the concept is widely emphasized and its meaning has been redefined on the basis of different values and goals, especially those related to market. Excellence has become the meter on which institutions are assessed and public funding allocated, the tool by which worldwide comparisons and rankings of institutions are built, and a marketable brand used by higher education institutions to present themselves.

This book offers an international and comparative view on excellence in higher education, ranging from policies to practices, mainly based on research results and empirical evidence, aiming at questioning the concept and its uses which are not only social constructions but also political ones. Far from being a neutral or technical concept, excellence is heavily infused with values which must be traced, analysed and made critical to understand its impacts, backlashes and unintended outcomes on higher education systems, institutions, academics and students.

Audience
The book is addressed to an international audience and in particular to higher education scholars and professionals. Those who are involved in higher education assessment, members of professional bodies and organizations in the higher education field, students in education, but also policy makers and the public opinion at large will profit from the works of a selected group of scholars coming from a variety of countries.
Questioning Excellence in Higher Education
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Questioning Excellence in Higher Education

*Policies, Experiences and Challenges in National and Comparative Perspective*

*Edited by*

Michele Rostan  
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Don F. Westerheijden, Gero Federkeil, Leon Cremonini, Frans Kaiser, and Maarja Beerkens-Soo
Excellence has become the 21st Century buzzword in higher education policy at the global level. Although this concept has historically been one of the core values of higher education, nowadays it is witnessing changes in its contents, meanings, values, goals and tools. In the last decade or so, the debate in the international arena on higher education quality has increasingly shifted from quality to excellence. Politicians, academics, journalists, even consulting bodies and firms for organisational innovation, are engaged in such a debate.

A first and general indicator of the internationally growing interest and concern about excellence in higher education is the publication of books on the topic: it’s easy to detect them browsing book stores’ websites inserting the keywords “excellence in higher education”. This literature often displays either a critical stance on it, or an apologetic and enthusiastic one. A book of the first kind is the one by Lewis (2006), on Harvard’s “betrayal” of its educational mission in favour of marketable excellence; one of the latter kind is Ruben’s (2003) fostering a normative-prescriptive model for structuring organisational excellence in higher education institutions drawn from the business sector. Besides, excellence in higher education has also been approached according to a more analytical view as it is the case of the book edited by De Corte (2003) which gathers contributions on the topic presented at a symposium organised by Academia Europaea and the International Academy of Education. On the whole, excellence has entered the agenda of a plurality of actors on the global scene.

A second indicator of the emergence of excellence as a key issue consists of the so-called ‘rankings movement’ which is both a manifestation of the new global competitive environment and a driver of change in the field of higher education. Since the early 2000s, the world rankings movement has gained not only a global scale but also a global relevance for higher education. The publication of Shanghai University international ranking (ARWU) in 2003 and of the Times Higher Education Supplement one in 2004 constitutes the starting point of the movement and a key reference for excellence. Since then the university rankings movement has expanded leading in few years to a plurality of rankings. On the whole, world university rankings – comparing national institutions – have generated a growing concern about their position in the global higher education field and growing efforts to compete for entering and positioning in the international rankings hierarchies. Thus, international rankings are presented and represented as unavoidable ‘measures’ of systems’ and institutions’ performances declined in term of excellence, and higher education systems and institutions compete for the
recognition of prestige and reputation on the basis of more or less common and legitimat ed sets of excellence criteria on which rankings are built (Vaira, 2009).

A third indicator of the growing interest and concern about excellence in higher education is detectable in national policy-making. The largest part of, if not all, developed and developing countries has been more and more engaged in promoting policies aiming at making respective systems and institutions to attain and/or to maintain top-level, or world-class, quality. Excellence as a policy issue reflects the institutional and competitive pressures exerted by the global rankings movement on national systems and institutions. Further, national policies for excellence incorporate definitions, measures, and methods provided by rankings, and on that basis are framed and pursued. Briefly, rankings are playing a relevant part in structuring, legitimising and strengthening policies for so-called world-class universities (see Higher Education Policy, Vol. 21, n. 1, 2008, special issue on world-class universities). Furthermore, these policies are, or aim at, reshaping national higher education systems in terms of a steeper and formally recognised institutional vertical stratification. Global rankings and their definition of excellence provide the legitimating argument to pursue this systems’ reshaping or restructuring.

Finally, excellence becomes a sort of ‘identity mark’ for higher education institutions across the world: looking at institutions’ websites it’s easy to find something declared as ‘excellent’. This is the sign that institutions worldwide are defining themselves and competing on the basis of excellence or, in other words, that excellence is the new vocabulary and rhetoric embodied by institutions to present and represent themselves in the global competitive arena.

On the whole, we can assert that excellence in higher education is undergoing a process of institutionalisation. The more the vocabulary and the rhetoric of excellence is enacted by political and university actors, the more it becomes legitimat ed, the more it gets institutionalised. Here, institutionalisation is defined not as a state reached by a socially constructed ‘object’, but as a process by which such an ‘object’ gains a growing degree of legitimation and taken-for-grantedness given to it by social actors (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Following Tolbert and Zucker (1996, p. 176-178) we can say that excellence in higher education has reached the semi-institutionalisation stage. At this stage a social construct has become quite widely diffused, the logic of its adoption/enactment by actors is based on normative and imitative action, the variance of its adoption growingly declines. But at the same time the construct is not completely taken-for-granted by actors and this manifests itself in the high level of theorisation it undergoes. Theorisation refers not only to efforts to provide the construct with stronger legitimation basis as the right or the best way to do desired and valued things; it also highlights that the construct is still contended, it is not fully accepted and legitimat ed, and that its contents and goals are debated, as the very fact that theorisation efforts are pursued to infuse the construct with a wider and stronger legitimating basis clearly shows. At the semi-institutionalisation stage, the social construct undergoes two kind of theorisation: the first can be labelled supportive theorising, that is efforts to legitimise and institutionalised the construct; the second can be defined as critical or counter-theorising, that is efforts to highlight
INTRODUCTION

the unintended outcomes, more or less perverse effects, contradictions, ambiguous outcomes as well as alternative definitions, aims and uses of the construct (Vaira, 2007, p. 139).

This state of affairs entails that struggles for the definition, the desirability and the aims of excellence occur within the higher education field. Struggles and problems arising from the enactment of excellence in higher education are reflected and thematized in this book which aims at questioning excellence on an empirical basis, investigating its meanings, definitions, tools, contradictions, tensions, and expected or actual outcomes. All this is intended to bring, hopefully, to a better understanding of the phenomenon and of its implications.

QUESTIONING EXCELLENCE

The essays here collected cast light on different aspects and dimensions of excellence making them problematic, that is an object of analytical inquiry and reflection. In this section we focus on some general aspects of excellence and of its implications for higher education systems and institutions, as they emerge from the contributions.

The first aspect regards, inevitably, global university rankings, as they are the main carriers of excellence. Although in the public debate they are presented as objective measures of excellence, this feature is questioned. Rankings are social constructions largely reflecting political interests and power. They assume a rather traditional conception of excellence by which institutions and their activities are measured and evaluated. They tend to reproduce previous formal and informal hierarchies. They use indicators and methods that are not only disputed, but also not appropriated if not fallacious (e.g. the weight and sum method). They are used more as a rhetoric device to legitimise systems’ reform and restructuring policies than as real tools to improve systems’ and institutions’ performance. All this doesn’t mean that they are a complete blunder; rather, it casts light on their nature of socially and politically constructed phenomenon which, in turn, allows to avoid their naïve reification as objective measures and to open room for their improvement as tools for the assessment of excellence in its diverse dimensions.

Secondly, excellence triggers restructuring processes within higher education systems. It is quite obvious that these processes aim at reshaping higher education systems’ structure in term of formalized vertical stratification, but what kind of effects do we expect from them? Do they lead to a higher degree of diversification within and between systems or, conversely, to growing convergence and isomorphism? Given the fact that excellence and policies for excellence are a rather recent phenomenon in the higher education field, there isn’t a neat answer to these questions. At the moment, it is possible to say that there is a mix of convergence and diversification: on the one hand, these policies are largely inspired by a common set of ideas, definitions and tools elaborated at the global level on excellence and the way to promote and pursue it; on the other hand, national systems and institutions respond in quite different ways to policies which, in turn, are shaped differently given the diversity of
national institutional structures both at the political level and at the higher education system one. Possibly, the dichotomy diversity/convergence is not fully appropriate to analyse such processes of change as one of us has asserted (Vaira, 2009) and different conceptual and theoretical frameworks taking into account both convergence and diversity in an unitary theoretical framework are needed, like glonal agency heuristic (Marginson and Rhoads, 2002) or the concept of allomorphism (Vaira, 2004).

Thirdly, what kind of excellence and, therefore, what kind of policies for excellence emerge and are detectable from the various analysis gathered in the book? The first clear feature is that excellence and policies for excellence are declined in terms of excellent, or world-class, research. All the national and comparative studies in the book highlight this typical trait which takes over the traditional conception of excellence as linked to the training of the leading classes. Although the dominance of research functions and activities is recognized, there are also clues that the traditional conception still works, maybe underneath the surface. It can be masked by an emphasis on research, but taking a closer look to who are the excellent it becomes clear that they are largely élite institutions. Although the connection has been criticised – for example by Shulman (2003) and Smith (2003) – a further indication of the role played by research is the widespread belief that excellent teaching and learning correspond to excellent research.

A fourth and last aspect concerns the kind of policies for excellence that are enacted. Generally, policies tend to award as excellent, and to fund accordingly, those institutions that are already strong and in a better position to play the excellence game. In this regards policies adopt the saint Mathew’s logic, by which the strong become stronger and the weak weaker. This kind of policies is favoured by institutional rankings which consider only individual institutions, failing to consider the system as a whole, and not taking into account different kinds of excellence existing in a given system (e.g. teaching functions for more disadvantaged social group, role of universities for regional socio-economic development, and so on). If a national government aims at improving the positions of its higher education institutions in the global rankings, it’s quite obvious that it bets on the stronger which better fit the definition of excellence conveyed and legitimated by national and/or world rankings. This doesn’t mean that this strategy is the best one, since it could work against systems’ performance as a recent publication by UNESCO shows regarding USA: a small number of American institutions dominates the global rankings, but the quality of the system in teaching and learning is low (UNESCO, 2010).

Another strikingly feature of the policies for excellence is that they are enacted not only to reshape higher education systems, but also as a legitimating argument to rationalise the funding streams both to the systems as a whole and to individual institutions. Given the growing concern about public expenditure in general, and for higher education in particular, governments use excellence policies to steer the funding to relatively few institutions. Whether policies provide extra funding for excellence (which could be otherwise given to finance the whole system), or they
allocate selectively the funding pot, the result is the same: the funding streamsecome highly rationalised in their distribution.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book splits into three parts. The first one deals with how excellence hasecome a global issue, with changes in its contents, meanings, goals, and with the
challenges it poses to higher education. The second focus on the emergence of
excellence as a policy issue, both in national and comparative perspectives, and on
its effects on higher education systems. The third casts light on how concepts of
excellence and policies to pursue it are implemented in national and/or institutional
settings.

Part one opens with Simon Marginson’s critical analysis and assessment of
world rankings as a regulating tool to build a new order in the higher education
field (Chapter 1, “The New World Order in Higher Education. Research
Rankings, Outcomes Measures and Institutional Classifications”). This new
order is embedded in the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and in the way it
has become a objectified reality in political, economic and higher education
discourses and practices. After having discussed the features of, and the tensions
in, knowledge production in the global landscape and in the university sector,
Marginson argues that the diffusion of university rankings makes
understandable and transparent to everyone not only university knowledge
production, but also knowledge economy itself, notwithstanding the
controversies and the deficiencies of rankings themselves. Rankings have
become the main information sources to decide investments in university
research and this in turn makes them a kind of non-governmental form of
organisation and regulation of the higher education sector. This is because
rankings are institutions’ status markers. For institutions, the status mark is both
a declaration and an investiture of status involving them into a win-loose game
which reproduces the traditional inherited status hierarchies in the higher
education field. Even worse possibly, rankings’ order obliterates the diversity
within the field concealing differences in produced knowledge, in languages, in
functions pursued by institutions, and among institutions. The author ends with
some proposals to rework rankings, making them more democratic and, above
all, more plurality-sensitive.

Chapter two by Ivar Bleiklie – “Excellence, Quality and the Diversity of Higher
Education Systems” – provides a close examination of the theme of diversity in
higher education related to excellence. The argument is based on the dialectic
between horizontal (or functional) and vertical (or status) diversification produced
by processes of integration within mass higher education systems and by policies
for quality assessment, excellence and selective funding. When excellence is
considered, the dialectic between the two sources of diversification leads to some
tensions: while policies for excellence rely on largely common criteria and
conceptions, triggering isomorphic processes, they impact on diverse value-infused
organisational environments. Institutions are functionally and organisationally
diverse with diverse institutionalized values. This leads to processes of manipulation, translation and interpretation by which policies for excellence are enacted by institutions. This in turn generates a relevant variety in the way excellence is conceived and put into practice. Bleiklie highlights that even if higher education institutions are exposed to rather common pressures to implement a certain kind of excellence, those pressures will not be equally relevant, nor equally perceived as normatively due by all institutions and even inside a single one. Author concludes that tensions generated by excellence and related policies, and by vertical diversification could trigger a process of system fragmentation resulting in a two-tiered structure: some institutions would compete and strive for excellence while the rest of them is left out.

Higher education in the United Kingdom is considered as one of the more ‘vertically differentiated’ systems in Europe: universities are ordered according to a hierarchy based on reputation and a small number of universities are regarded as ‘top’ or ‘excellent’ institutions. It is therefore the right context to address questions on the relationship between students’ experience, their learning outcomes and excellence in higher education, as John Brennan and Kavita Patel do in chapter three, “Excellence and the Student Experience of Higher Education: What It Is and How to Find It”. Building on the results of a recent study on ‘what is learnt at university’, authors argue that “differences in learning outcomes as perceived by students do not seem to reflect reputational rankings of universities” while it is the type of students’ individual experience at their university and the subject they study which matters. Further, ‘reputation for excellence’ plays a minor role in explaining students’ choice of study course and university, and excellence seems to have different meanings in students’ understanding. Wherever they study, students report having experienced something ‘excellent’ although they seems to have different notions of what is excellent. These findings open up the possibility to understand excellence not only in terms of vertical and hierarchical differences but also as a matter of matching the aspirations of different students with what different universities can provide them.

Part two begins with a comparative analysis of policies for excellence by Michele Rostan and Massimiliano Vaira (Chapter 4, “Structuring the Field of Excellence. A Comparative View on Policies, Actors, Interests and Conflicts in Four European Countries”). The comparative analysis shows how policies for excellence are framed, enacted and implemented in England, France, Germany and Italy, illustrating their contents, similarities and differences. After having discussed the global context within which, and the processes by which, excellence has become a policy issue in the four countries, authors highlight how policies for excellence are affecting higher education systems’ structure. Given the fact that excellence is an intrinsically distinctive and divisive concept, it produces not only a steeper vertical stratification but also division lines and new cleavages along which institutions and actors mobilize and struggle to maintain excellence hierarchies, or to change them partially or completely. As a consequence, fragmentation processes in systems’ structure are set up, albeit with different intensity and scope. In parallel, re-structuring processes occur, shaping systems on new basis, and pushing
INTRODUCTION

towards a unified and stratified structure where institutions become structurally and functionally more differentiated.

Relying on an adaptation of the Institutional Analysis and Development framework for international studies of higher education policy, in chapter five, “Defining and Developing Excellence in Three National Settings: Israel, South Africa and the U.S.”, Richard C. Richardson, Teboho Moja and Uri Cohen compare the way excellence is defined and pursued in three higher education systems: the two recently transformed systems of South Africa and Israel, and the more established one of California. The main traits of the three systems are sketched in short narratives, and cross-country similarities and differences in the rules-in-use in six domains – system design, state leadership, information, access and achievement, fiscal policies, research & development – are identified. Basing on the collected evidence, answers to five questions on excellence are suggested. Authors conclude that while in all the three countries excellence is taken into consideration in defining systems’ goals and priorities, an explicit definition of it is lacking, and different visions of excellence coexist possibly as a means to ensure the effective functioning of mass higher education systems. In pursuing excellence, a variety of approaches is adopted and the problem of reconciling excellence with other goals is also addressed. In the three systems, the set of established rules embodying views on how to achieve excellence, and seeking a balance between state regulation, academic values and market forces, seems to yield outcomes that are consistent with the expectations of the leadership.

Two large institutions of the two largest higher education systems in the world are compared by Kathryn Mohrman in chapter six, “Excellence and Mass Higher Education in China and the United States”, in order to discuss definitions and manifestations of excellence in mass higher education. The comparative exercise is carried out at three levels – institutional, national and international – addressing two broad policy issues, namely autonomy and competitiveness, focusing respectively on policy decisions about quality in higher education and on science and technology and related policies. Although both Chinese and American institutions and systems face similar global challenges and constraints, the two considered universities operate in specific political environments, and relevant institutional and national practices are different. When quality is at stake, comparison at the national level shows that in the US multiple definitions of excellence coexist, there are strong tensions between the federal government – who doesn’t have direct responsibility in higher education – and public universities on who is entitled to define excellence, and it is difficult to determine whose definition of excellence prevails. Things appear to be different in China. Recent reforms fostering more institutional autonomy notwithstanding, the state still plays a strong role in defining excellence. A huge public effort is devoted to the creation of a number of world-class universities and the criteria included in the Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking focusing on research tend to be seen as benchmarks in defining excellence. As far as competitiveness is concerned, while in the US different and competing views on what is meant by excellence in higher education are widespread, in China a clear priority is placed on science and technology. Further,
China seems able to avoid some of the difficulties that the US are facing – for instance, focus on short-term results and good ideas without funding – through top-down planning and clearly targeted national investments. Yet, comparative analysis highlights two problems in China’s efforts to achieve excellence and competitiveness: a talent shortage in scientific and technological fields, and a lack of academic freedom which is generally considered as an essential condition for creating world-class universities.

Finally, part three focuses on how excellence is implemented at the national and institutional levels. Chapter seven by Brenda Little and William Locke – “Conceptions of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and Implications for Future Policy and Practice” – deals with how excellence in teaching and learning has been implemented in the British case. What emerges from the analysis is that the discourse of excellence in teaching and learning highlights a plurality of tensions between different conceptions both of excellence and of teaching (e.g. their goals, methods, and so on). The two authors maintain that excellence seems to be a symptom of the desire to measure higher education performance on the basis of standards, reflecting the marketisation of higher education. Marketisation and the strive for excellence are apparent in the spreading of university rankings at global and national levels. Focusing on the latter, Little and Locke show how rankings are based on a pre-conceived notion of excellence. At the same time, though, each ranking producer has its own criteria for building the ranking. These criteria appear to be largely unsuitable both for indicators and for methods used. Further, authors show that prospective students are, quite unexpectedly, far less interested in these rankings when choosing institutions and study courses. As a matter of fact, students search information different from that presented in league tables and choose accordingly to it. In the light of their analysis, authors offer some suggestions for future policies and practices for excellence in teaching and learning.

Chapter eight by Stephanie Mignot-Gérard – “Making Decisions Without Considering Intrinsic Academic Quality. Some Evidence from French Universities (1998-2005)” – focuses on the relationships between institutional governance and excellence. In the last twenty-two years the French system has been reformed several times and reforms have been centred on institutional governance drawing from managerialism. The result has been a growing tendency towards centralised institutional decision-making and entrepreneurial management. Curiously enough, though, this trend has not entailed a parallel emphasis on quality and excellence. Symmetrically, criticisms from academics are directed towards centralisation and managerialism in the name of traditional academic values (e.g. collegiality) with no references to quality and excellence. This facet of the French case is important, because it casts light on the way policy initiatives for excellence are being enacted by institutions (see also the chapter by Rostan and Vaira). The absence in the academic debate of the issues of quality and excellence may explain certain kind of institutional responses to these initiatives.

Within Italian higher education there is a small group of public institutions – the so called ‘schools of excellence’ – which pursue the mission of ‘producing’
excellent students and excellent young researchers providing an example of structural diversification and potential stratification in a system which is traditionally considered as rather homogenous, resistant to change, and reluctant to recognize differences in quality. In chapter nine, “Schools of Excellence in Italy”, Franco Rositi and Fiammetta Corradi present the schools of excellence and their teaching and research activities distinguishing two historical ‘models’ – based on the experience of the Scuola Normale in Pisa, and of the International School of Advanced Studies in Trieste – to which the new schools established in the ‘90s have referred to. Authors highlight the peculiarities of these schools within the international landscape: they don’t represent a separate sector or a parallel channel of higher education; at the undergraduate level they provide educational programmes which are complementary and not alternative to the ones provided by universities; in advanced studies they aim at providing educational opportunities to young people rather than ideal working conditions to well established scholars. The existence of the schools of excellence has some implications for the entire Italian higher education system. It forces connected universities – and all institutions more generally – to care about the quality of academic teaching in mass higher education. Furthermore, it calls for a diversification and a stratification of the whole system which are not based on the opposition between élite and mass education but require a multi-level design.

The creation of a European Higher Education Area in the context of the Bologna process and of a European Research Area following the Lisbon strategy will lead to growing European mobility of students and higher education staff. As a consequence, information on institutions and study programmes will become more important for all involved actors – students, families, academics – in order to decide where to study or work within Europe. In chapter ten, “Ranking Goes International. Piloting the CHE Ranking of Study Programmes in Flanders and the Netherlands”, Don Westerheijden, Gero Federkeil, Leon Cremonini, Frans Kaiser, and Maarja Beerens-Soo, present and discuss the project of extension of the German CHE Ranking approach to other countries as a way to provide appropriate information on a European scale. First, authors review some critical issues in the design of university rankings, discuss the effects of rankings on higher education systems, and illustrate the characteristics of existing international rankings highlighting the advantages of the CHE ranking. Second, the pilot project extending to the Netherlands and Flanders the already existing wider CHE Ranking of German, Austrian and Swiss higher education institutions is presented, and its results are discussed in details drawing a number of lessons for future student information systems. Finally, authors conclude that although rankings are increasingly going international the somehow disappointing aftermath of the pilot project – with Flanders not joining the CHE rankings on a regular basis and the Netherlands deciding to keep its information system as separate from CHE albeit having all Dutch universities taking part in the CHE rankings – demonstrates that the process of internationalisation of rankings in Europe remains not only incremental but also unpredictable due to contextual factors that play a role in adopting policy changes in higher education.
As concluding remarks, we would like to stress some common aspects of excellence in higher education that emerge from the contributions.

Firstly, it is generally acknowledged that excellence is embedded in a transnational dimension. Due to the growing internationalisation and competition currently affecting higher education, it has become a global issue which national systems and institutions, as well as politics, must face. In this landscape the global university rankings movement plays a role of great momentum, even though rankings are indeed contested.

Secondly, excellence is by and large related to research because the hegemonic rhetoric of knowledge society and economy stresses the role of scientific and technological research as the main lever for innovation-based competitiveness. Symmetrically, excellence in teaching and learning is far less considered because it recalls elitist values, it is more difficult to assess and measures, and it has a plurality of meanings which makes it difficult to define.

Thirdly, excellence has become a political issue and concern everywhere. National states enact policies for excellence often supporting them with extra-funding. At the same time, though, these policies have two more general goals: a) re-structuring higher education systems in term of a steeper vertical stratification in order to guide governance and funding policies in the sector; b) changing the modus operandi of institutions, of their articulations, and of individual academics.

Fourthly, both rankings and policies inspired by them seem to rely on a quite traditional notion of excellence which is taken for granted and tends to reproduce inherited hierarchies, instead of promoting excellence wherever it emerges. Further, this notion tends to obliterate different and competing conceptions of excellence related to higher education institutions’ diversity of purposes, missions, organisation, and functions.

This book includes the revised version of some of the papers presented at the 21st Annual Conference of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) on “Excellence and Diversity in Higher Education. Meanings, Goals, and Instruments” which took place at the University of Pavia in 2008. The ten contributions were selected by editors from more than eighty papers presented at the Conference. Although the chapters in this volume do not cover all the topics discussed at the Conference, the book aims at pointing out some major issues and at being a useful tool in promoting and steering further debates and inquiries on excellence and policies for excellence in higher education.

NOTES

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PART 1

EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
GLOBAL ISSUES
THE NEW WORLD ORDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Research rankings, outcomes measures and institutional classifications

INTRODUCTION

Nine years ago in 2002 there were no global university rankings. There were national rankings in some countries. The only really important one was US News and World Report (USNWR, 2008) which helped to form the national higher education system-market in the United States. Few of the other major national systems saw themselves as a quasi-economic market, and few other systems used public rankings of institutions. Nine years ago there were no significant global research rankings, and measures of publications and citations were left to a few specialists in research policy and management. Classifications of institutions were practiced by the U.S. Carnegie Commission, and planned by China, but there was no general movement in that direction. As for globally comparative measures of learning outcomes, this was not only impossible but unthinkable. Comparison of learning outcomes even within a single national system was rarely considered.

There were references to ‘the knowledge economy’, or ‘the knowledge society’, or the ‘global knowledge economy’ or ‘k-economy’. But with the exception of genuine curiosity among a handful of historical sociologists in higher education studies (e.g. Valimaa & Hoffman, 2008), these concepts remained undefined. The ‘global knowledge economy’ invoked the universal reverence for science, but was scarcely scientific. It was a rhetorical emblem designed to position universities and science more favourably in the eyes of government, business and the public. The global knowledge economy is the future, implied its advocates in higher education. This means that we are the future, they seemed to say. If you want to position yourself, your firm or your country on the crest of the wave, then you must invest generously in us. In other words the ‘global knowledge economy’ functioned as little more than an empty instinctual claim to ultra modernity—which (along with the opposite move, the routine appeal to standards and tradition-as-order) is one of the standard positioning strategies that are always being used in political societies.

How things change! The global knowledge economy has arrived and in a determining role—whether we in higher education like its forms or whether we do not. It has suddenly taken shape, transmogrifying from a vague rhetorical device to a visible and active domain of comparison and production. In doing so it has drawn together existing practices while also creating something new. Its new systems are partly of our own devising and partly imposed on us, and they are rapidly changing the work of universities, the flows of knowledge and the map of global relations.
Starting in 2003, global rankings of universities have rapidly gained media and public focus around the world (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). They are shaping the strategic behaviors of university leaders, governments, students, and employers (Hazelkorn, 2008). They are used for internal monitoring in the growing higher education systems of Asia; and associated with accelerated investments in research and development (R&D) in Germany, and the five billion euro “Operation Campus” in France, designed to create ten regional centres of excellence in higher education and research (Salmi, 2009, p. 87). The United States is the exception. The fixation of Americans on the national rankings of domestic universities and colleges, together with an easy confidence that US universities have no equal, has so far protected them from global comparison. But American interest in global rankings will quicken if East Asia, especially China, continues its rapid advance.

This chapter describes the emergent global knowledge economy, focusing on the higher education part of it. It argues that the global knowledge economy is comprised not as a single closed system but as an open and loosely bounded global space with three intersecting but heterogeneous systems within it, that vary in their structure and dynamism – (1) an informal open source communicative ecology, (2) a regulatory system both informal and formal for assigning value to knowledge, and (3) commercial knowledge markets that are formalised in conventional financial terms. The chapter explores—though it does not exhaust—the conjunction of these three systems; and discusses the new regulatory mechanisms: university and research rankings, outputs measures and institutional classifications.

The final section of the chapter sets out evolving thoughts about where and how we might attempt to steer these regulatory mechanisms, so as to maximize the scope for self-determination, cultural diversity and creativity in the sector.

COMPONENTS OF THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The global stock of knowledge is the knowledge that enters the cross-border circuits in which different ideas, texts, images and information are exchanged. Conventionally, we refer to ‘global knowledge flows’. These flows take in all of (a) tradeable knowledge-intensive commodities for which money is exchanged, extending from intellectual property (IP) and commercial know-how to certain industrial goods; and (b) knowledge-intensive goods freely distributed on an open source basis, and/or (c) exchanged in a form of gift economy (Mauss, 1954/1990). Taken together, the production, exchange, and circulation of research, knowledge, and information constitute the global knowledge economy, or ‘k-economy’.

The k-economy overlaps with the financial economy and industrial economy at many points. The relationship between these three spheres of economic activity (broadly defined) eludes easy definition. The one cannot be wholly reduced to the other. The knowledge economy is more than a branch of the industrial economy, and it not wholly contained within the lattice of financial transactions. This is because its logics are social and cultural as well as economic. Arguably, when nations, regions and universities build capacity in the knowledge economy, they routinely do so in
relation to all three sets of relationships: those of capitalist economy, those of status competition, and those of open source exchange. The chapter will now expand a little on the three domains and their fecund intersections.

In policy discussions on research, the principal attention is focused on the commercial potentials of knowledge. National innovation systems are structured so as to maximize the potential take-up of knowledge by nationally-based industry so as to further competitiveness in general and innovations in particular. Yet while some knowledge is drawn upon for innovations in production, and the economic role of knowledge-intensive goods is growing in many industries, commercial IP is only a small part of the k-economy. Nor is even that commercial component of knowledge wholly contained by the old industrial and financial descriptors.

As the reference to the exchange of gifts suggests, the knowledge economy is shaped not only by the logic of a production and transactional economy but by the logic of social signs and status. Arguably, status production and competition has always been integral to the dissemination of scholarship, research knowledge and the routine operations of universities and scholarly life (Frank & Cook, 1995). And as we shall see, status competition is driving the evolution of ranking systems.

At the same time—to complicate matters further—the knowledge economy is also driven by social relations that are the opposite of hierarchical status relations, and are foreign to the legally bordered commodities and possessive individualism of a market economy. These social relations are those of open source knowledge and cultural production. The Internet has greatly facilitated the open source production and dissemination of knowledge, which is exceptionally dynamic. (At the same time, the Internet has also facilitated commerce in knowledge, and the production and circulation of status in relation to knowledge and to universities).

Open source knowledge might be the most important element in the whole complex mix that is the knowledge economy. Most of the time we ‘do’ knowledge in free exchange. It is true that when it is first produced, knowledge and ideas can be owned and controlled by their creator and/or the owner of the labour of their creator. At this point knowledge can be turned into patents and copyrights, and also codified as high science published in journals that confers status on its creators and on the universities that house them. But even then, it is often simply given away. And once disseminated in the public domain, knowledge is ‘out’ and it can no longer be confined either by a commodity capitalist logic or a social status logic. It flows freely, while at the same time retaining much of its original use value. Once conceived by its creator, the mathematical theorem continues to confer value on its user no matter how many times it is used, and by how many people.

**Knowledge as a Public Good**

This reflects the intrinsic economic character of knowledge as a predominantly public good (Samuelson, 1954; Marginson, 2007). In 1954 Paul Samuelson systematized the notion of ‘public goods’, economic goods that are non-rivalrous and non-excludable and tend to be under-produced in commercial markets. Goods
are non-rivalrous when they can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted, for example knowledge of a mathematical theorem. Goods are non-excludable when the benefits cannot be confined to individual buyers, such as social tolerance, or law and order. Ten years ago Joseph Stiglitz (1999) argued that knowledge is close to a pure public good. Except for commercial property such as copyrights and patents, the natural price of knowledge is zero. Stiglitz also noted that a large component of knowledge consists of global public goods. The mathematical theorem is useful all over the world and its price everywhere is zero.

Even so, the economics of public goods has been unable to fully capture the nature of the knowledge economy. Economics cannot fully comprehend a relational system (if it is a ‘system’) that lies partly inside and partly outside of cultural industries, publishing markets, and learned academies; in which exchange is often open-ended and populated by a strange public/private mixture of e-business and gifts; with information flows and networks that tend towards infinity. Samuelson’s idea of public goods correctly highlights the problem of market failure but does not really capture the scale, fertility, and disorder of the open source regime; nor does it pinpoint the zero-sum logic of status competition.

Perhaps this limitation of economics is built into its normative framework, a framework that leads it always to privilege one aspect of the knowledge economy—market-based (commercial) production—as distinct from the other two aspects named above, status competition and open source knowledge. It seems that economists, or at least non-Marxian economists, are deeply interested in wealth creation in the capitalist form. Confronted by the unusual nature of knowledge—a quality that is never exhausted, and becomes less scarce as its use increases, and one that is capable of both private possession and collective character at different points in its cycle—most economists have tended to model knowledge goods simply as the potential prototypes of commercial products, as if they are ‘pre-capitalist’ in nature, part of the natural conditions in which industry does its value-creating work. But in many respects knowledge, especially in its global forms, seems post-capitalist rather than pre-capitalist. And not only does most knowledge never enter the circuits of commercial capital; even knowledge goods that take a commercial form are peculiar beasts that are shaped by the logic of public goods.

The original producer holds first mover advantage. This provides the only solid basis for a commercial intellectual property regime. But unlike other forms of capital, and in this respect more akin to perishable consumption goods, the commercial value of intellectual property diminishes and disappears with use. When commercial knowledge goods are in circulation they become non-excludable. Any property regime that tries to hold down commodity forms at this point is entirely artificial. After the first mover stage has passed copyright is not just difficult to police, it is violated at every turn and it is ultimately impossible to enforce. But unlike perishable consumption goods, knowledge in the public domain is often still useful, and can find its way into other new knowledge—and other new commodities. Free public knowledge goods are subject to market failure. It is not profitable for market-based firms to produce non-rivalrous and/or non-excludable goods. But some of these public knowledge goods produced by
research provide conditions of production of other, market goods, in the same manner as public goods such as transaction regulation or preventive medicine.

The intrinsic character of knowledge makes it possible to (temporarily) confine knowledge as IP and as status-laden, but also sets limits on the reach of both capitalist competition in knowledge, and the role of knowledge in status competition. If knowledge could only be produced in and for capitalist markets, and/or could only be deployed to build the status of its creators and their institutions, then most of the present global knowledge flows would disappear.

OPEN SOURCE KNOWLEDGE MEETS CAPITALISM

As is often remarked, the digital era has transformed the potentials of the global knowledge economy (Castells, 2000; Peters, et al., 2009). First, as suggested above, it has constituted the architecture of a more extensive and intensive system of social relations, freely crossing borders, which is particularly facile in the exchange of ideas, knowledge and information. Second, it has provided fertile and sustainable means for the production and dissemination of specific knowledge-intensive goods, such as cultural artefacts, learning packages and electronic software. In the form of novel ideas and know-how and as first creations of works of art—that is, as original goods—most knowledge goods have little mass and require little industrial energy, resting largely on human energy and time. Subsequently, most such goods can be digitally copied with minimal resources, energy, and time. They can also be digitally reproduced as standard knowledge-intensive and design-intensive commodities for sale, at which point they acquire prices and become subject to the capitalist economic logic of scarcity and private property. They then tend to absorb more energy than before, in the industrial and commercial functions of mass production, transport, display, marketing and retail.

Thus the k-economy is powered by two heterogenous sources of growth. The first is economic commerce, which turns knowledge (along with everything else) to its own purposes, without exhausting the potentialities of knowledge. The second is free cultural creation, which is decentralized, creative and unpredictable, circulating knowledge goods on a free and open basis, though only to those persons with the technological and cultural means to access knowledge flows.

Though these two drivers of the production and dissemination of knowledge goods have separate motors, the extension of knowledge production and the expansion of markets converge at many points. A key intermediary role is played by communication systems. Manuel Castells (2000, p. 71) remarks that the unit benefits of networks grow at an increasing rate because of an expanding number of connections. Meanwhile, the cost of network expansion grows in linear terms. The cost of each addition to the network is constant. The benefit/cost ratio continually increases, so the rate of network expansion also increases over time until all potential nodes are included. The process has an open source logic but is also the source of profit for the communications companies providing the systems, hardware and software, while opening the way to a great range of electronic commerce. On one hand we have the extraordinary growth dynamism of the open
source ecology, and its quasi-democratic tendency to universality; on the other the growing universality of the open source space is opening up whole demographics to commerce, in the manner of free to air television at an earlier time. The grid of the network morphs into a product market and system of financial exchange, even while open systems contribute a continuing flow of further knowledge goods originating from outside the trading economy: some of which catalyze other free knowledge goods, knowledge producing knowledge without mediation; some of which become captured by market producers and turned into commodities. In some countries, over 80 percent of households have personal computers and the majority use the Internet; broadband access was at 25 percent in OECD countries in 2006 and rising steeply, and blogs are growing exponentially (OECD, 2008b, pp. 55-62).

**IP in Universities**

This peculiar, public good-laden character of knowledge helps to explain why universities have been consistently disappointed in their expectations of commercial returns to research. The knowledge economy has not become associated with a vast new industry of commercial science. There are normally several steps that must occur before ideas become enfolded into commodities, and by that stage the ideas have long been transformed by other economic processes in which the commercial value is created. It takes deep pockets to hold onto private ownership of the idea in itself all the way down the commercial value-creating chain. From time to time there are rare cases of lucrative research programs, especially in pharmaceutics, other branches of biotechnology and electronics, in which research-generated knowledge owned by universities and/or their scientists feed directly into a new product. But high income earning patents are not the norm in research. Only a small proportion of research results in specific fields turn out to be commercially patentable (OECD, 2008a, pp. 102-103). (These fields do not include higher education studies!) When universities try to lockup research results as patents they have difficulty sustaining the costs of worldwide protection. Whether universities are imagined as companies or not, the bottom line is they lack the venture capital resources to develop commercial products. Worse, when they behave as R&D companies there is a danger they will crowd out the genuine actors in the markets for innovation and venture capital. After two decades of official policies designed to directly integrate university science with the industrial and financial economies, university science remains overwhelmingly dependent on the non-market public sector and (in the USA) non-market private philanthropy. Commercial work is mostly confined to a few research universities, and constitute little more than 5 per cent of total income for research even in the USA.

Yet these free knowledge goods that are so hard to nail down as economic property are a source of innovations and profitable new products in all sectors of the contemporary capitalist economy. This is not to say all such knowledge goods produced in universities are economically useful—by no means. Nevertheless, much knowledge disseminated from universities can contribute to commercial production, under the right conditions. And it is impossible to forecast the full
range of its potential uses at the time that research knowledge is produced. Hence the recent turn in innovation policy at the OECD. In a welcome change, and one that is also consistent with the evolution of the knowledge economy, emphasis is swinging from the goal of commercialization at any cost, to open access science.

In *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society* the OECD states: ‘a common criticism of commercialization is it takes at best a restricted view of the nature of innovation, and of the role of universities in innovation processes’ (OECD, 2008b, p. 120). Commercialization of knowledge as Intellectual Property Rights requires secrecy in order to appropriate the benefits. By securing private ownership and restricting the flow of knowledge, this reduces the potential take-up in innovation and raises the costs for industry in accessing and using knowledge. Universities may play a stronger role in the economy by diffusing and divulging results, states the OECD. Free dissemination in an open source setting tends to speed innovation. The OECD also argues for the benefits of academic freedom, for research driven by curiosity as well as research driven by the potential use of knowledge. Research systems with a significant component of undirected funding, and longer term programs not just short term research projects, provide more scope for curiosity-driven inquiry. For the most part, commercial realization of the discovery process is better left to the market. Universities should do what they and only they are best at, which is curiosity-driven creativity together with research training.

We can note in passing that all of this means that universal or even the widespread commodification of university research, which is welcome to some and is feared by others, is never going to happen. The highpoint of neo-liberal expectations about academic capitalism has been passed. Along with the neo-liberal advocates of commercial science, the critics of academic capitalism too will need to revise their position. Not that we are on the brink of creative utopia in the open source knowledge universe. For every move to global extension and openness, there is an attempt to secure closure. This is where status competition and hierarchy come into play. Global research ranking is one system of closure.

**OPEN SOURCE KNOWLEDGE MEETS THE STATUS HIERARCHY**

Do knowledge and information circulate freely from all quarters in a universal process of flat cultural exchange? Of course they do not. And everybody knows it.

It is true that knowledge can flow freely—and there is always a ‘flat’ moment in knowledge formation, in which it should be possible for all texts, all data, all possible statements to be considered. Detached synthetic reasoning depends on this capacity to imagine all possible truth as ‘flat’ in the sense of having equal potential value with all other possibilities (for a moment, at least). Yet before then selection decisions have already been made. The possible truths have been sieved and sorted before the final set of choices is considered. And some possibilities were never seriously considered. In other words knowledge might flow freely for much of the time, and that is its nature, but it is also subject to *social organization*. Knowledge flows are often one-way, not two-way or multiple in form. Knowledge flows freely when it can, but in practice it often also flows disjunctively. It is subject to
blockages and processes of channelling in which uneven values are affixed to each ‘particle’ of knowledge, prior to its use. (Here we might say that knowledge is like light, or music. It takes two forms simultaneously: that of particles/notes, allowing us to identify discrete items of knowledge, and that of waves or liquid-like flows). So how is knowledge sorted prior to use—and how determining is this process? In other words, how do potentially chaotic open source flows of knowledge, which have no evident tendency towards predictability let alone to equilibrium, become reconciled with a world of national hierarchies, economic markets, government agencies, and institutions that routinely require stability and control in order to function? Given its public good character and the free flow of communications in the open source setting, how can knowledge translated from the open source setting into processes and institutions, which thereby secure coherence and a guiding and controlling role within the global k-economy? If the k-economy consisted solely or largely of commercial markets in knowledge goods, that question would be easily resolved. We would have a ready-made system for translating knowledge into ordered values. Market prices would do it. But the capitalist expedient will not serve here. Knowledge production and dissemination is subject to market failure, most knowledge takes the form of public goods, and despite the imaginings of some economists, there is no feasible basis whereby proxy or shadow ‘prices’ can be assigned to public goods on this scale. Another method of valuation is needed. There has long been an informal means of assigning value to knowledge. That is social status. There are hierarchies of knowledge and of knowledge producers, as everyone who works in universities is aware. Some knowledge—knowledge that is produced in specific languages (for example English, before that Latin or German); knowledge produced from certain locations; and knowledge in certain forms (for example leading journals)—has long been valued more highly than other knowledge, in a process that spans national borders. Knowledge is shaped and codified in research grant and patenting systems; research training; journals, books and websites; research centres and networks; professional organizations; and academic awards. These exercise a partial authority in relation to knowledge flows, including the growing volumes of knowledge pumped through open source dissemination, without exhaustively controlling those flows. In theory ideas can come from anywhere. In the real world, the means of production of authoritative knowledge have always been concentrated in particular universities, cities, national systems, languages, corporations and brands with a superior capacity in production or dissemination, often located in the USA and U.K (Marginson, 2008). They stamp their presence on the k-economy and pull its flows in their favour.

Enter Global University Rankings

In sum, the free flows of public good knowledge are vectored by a system of status production that assigns value to knowledge and arranges it in ordered patterns. Until recently this system of status production was largely decentralized, fragmented and informal in character. For a long time, academic knowledge was structured by semi-formal procedures and conventions. Institutional ranks and
journal hierarchies operated by elite consensus and osmosis rather than transparent and universal metrics. So what has changed? My contention is that what has happened is this—arcane academic means of valuing knowledge, by themselves, are no longer good enough. In the last decade, modernized, systematic and accessible instruments have emerged and have crystallized in a system for regulating value, which is again one that is based on status and status measures. Enter global university rankings, especially those based in research, and the associated mechanisms for valuing science, including publication and citation metrics. More recently, systems of institutional classification have begun to emerge, in China and Europe, to join the Carnegie Classification in the United States, primarily to order, facilitate and legitimate institutional comparisons.

These new systems are associated with a culture of transparency. It creates more modernized, systematic and accessible comparison and vertical ordering. It has sprung from several quarters: the publishing industries, the Internet, and higher education itself, with some help from government agencies. It is both formal and informal, but the point is that it is more transparent and systematic than the more informal and (to an outsider) obscure university-based 'system' of valuation that preceded it. Rankings and outcomes tables are easily comprehended by outsiders: by business, industry and government, and families deciding to invest in foreign universities. This new system may eventually extend to mechanisms for comparing teaching and learning across national borders, and comparing the contributions of higher education to work and to innovation in industry, even though these are very context dependent. But the main function of the system is to value knowledge and knowledge producers and fix them in a known hierarchy. It is hard to over-estimate the significance of this development. The new system for valuing knowledge renders the k-economy understandable to those who observe it. In doing so it creates what they see and the way they see it. It makes, reproduces and limits the k-economy. What holds the global k-economy together is not uniform environmental conditions, such as regulation in a national higher education system, or a common institutional culture. There are no common global environmental conditions except those that are constructed. What gives form to the k-economy is these very technologies of value creation: rankings, outcomes metrics and classifications.

After the new mechanisms of global comparison and ranking of universities as institutions appeared in 2003 (Shanghai Jiao Tong University) and 2004 (the Times Higher Education) they were rapidly taken up around the world, despite the many practical deficiencies and normative controversies that attended—and continue to attend—these instruments and others like them. They were taken up almost everywhere because need for something like this was felt almost everywhere, especially beyond the university gate. There had to be a way of managing and interpreting the fast growing knowledge flows, and of sorting both the old and new knowledge players. With knowledge elevated to an ever more central, strategic and ubiquitous function in human affairs, there had to be a way of regulating relations between the knowledge economy, the financial and industrial economies, and government. Thus university rankings and publication/citation metrics have quickly become used to inform economic investments in research, and audit and
accountability. Though in many ways this remains an informal system—more university rankings are produced by university centres and newsmagazines than by public officials, and none by central banks—it is nevertheless a system of regulation. The rise of global university and research rankings are part of a larger process in which non-government forms of organization have become increasingly important in social and economic regulation. What distinguishes the system for regulating knowledge via rankings, research metrics, outcomes measures and classifications is not its continuing informal character but its global character. Correspondingly, what distinguishes this form of globalisation is status markers. It seems that before the global higher education setting can be understood as a single regulatory space, and as a one-world library with all of the knowledge inside, it must be understood as a great chain of being ordered by age-old signs of hierarchy.

Open source, Status hierarchy and Capitalism

Studies of student choice-making find that university status is far more important than teaching quality (Marginson, 2006); nothing in higher education has the same emotional pull as gothic spires and scholarly clerical cloisters; and working in a research powerhouse alone is sufficient to generates a lifetime of self-satisfaction. Status competition, and the zeal, the addiction that it inspires, no doubt helps to insulate universities from those who would like to impose on them a wholesale business model or a solely instrumental view of research. Traditional university status relationships have always provided this insulation from economic markets as Pierre Bourdieu (1988) points out. Moreover, publication and citation rates foregrounds the role of basic science as distinct from its applications in industry. In this respect university rankings might help to sustain university autonomy and the academic freedom of peer-review mediated research (providing the performance measures do not deviate too far from its norms); while league tables strengthen the social standing of the leading universities—though they are a savage form of hierarchy, one that steeply subordinates every other higher education institution.

Status competition imposes its own different kind of closure and its own constraints on agency and its freedoms, different to those of economic markets. With the systematisation of rankings, these limits may be biting deeper than before.

In the face of the potentials of open source knowledge and communicative association, with its flexible combination of loose ties, free agency and its vast common space for ideas and engagements, status competition imposes a traditional brand of closure. Perhaps in the face of openness, novelty and complexity there is a deep human yearning for definition, simplification and closure. More concretely, it is in the interests of higher education institutions, national governments, publishing companies, scientific communities and others to impose on the partly mapped k-economy, where they can, their chosen method of ordering and scale of value. The emergent rankings systems and measures of outcomes reflect these combined and shifting forces. Inevitably the k-status system tends to reflect the status quo. It would be ineffective if it did not. The question to consider is the extent to which its particular metrics also secure closure and block upward institutional mobility.
Here the news so far is not good. The new system of World’s Best Universities is a recycling of the old ‘reputation market’ (van Vught, 2008). With past performance (‘track record’) installed at the centre of the regulatory system, and more so in rankings such as the *Times Higher Education* that use ‘reputation’ indicators, reproduction is stabilized. The only credible rankings are those where the list is consistent with the received wisdom about ‘quality’, the bedrock of comparison. Ranking only seems to work when the old university and imperial interests are sustained. Harvard should be number one; that is the common sense of the sector. University league tables and journal hierarchies turn the received hierarchy into the natural order of things. By this means the old order is empirically verified, and reproduced into the future. Status closure is more complete than marketized closure. Even when entry to economic markets is closed on a cartel basis there is normally scope for upward mobility inside the market. Great automobile companies or electronics manufacturers rise and fall in the span of a couple of generations. There is very little upward movement at the top of university hierarchies. Great universities rise and fall not over decades but over centuries. No doubt status competition provides a stronger form of control over the chaotic potentials of globalization, than an economic market can. The k-economy is post-capitalist. But it also rests on pre-capitalist and pre-modern social relations.

As noted by Fred Hirsch (1976) and Robert Frank (1985), some forms of status competition involve financial exchange in economic markets, as when royalties accrue to the stars of film or recorded music. Star researchers that confer rankings performance are also in a celebrity status market. Other status competition takes place without money changing hands at all. For example in higher education in Germany, tuition is still largely free, but there is a scarcity of places for students in elite institutions. These places are status goods. They are sought on the basis of the status of the institution; they are assigned on the basis of status of student; and bright students and selective students then confer further status on each other. In free systems, we still have status competition, or a ‘higher education market’ in the sense the term is used in the USA. Here the crucial characteristic of status goods, that determines the logic of status competition, is that because status goods are goods of position within a finite hierarchy there is an *absolute limit* to the number of goods of high value (Marginson, 2006). As Hirsch puts it “positional competition … is a zero-sum game. What winners win, losers lose” (Hirsch 1976, 27 & 52). “Saying that a high-ranked position in society is a thing of real value is exactly the same as saying a low-ranked position imposes real costs” (Frank 1985, 117). Positional/status goods confer advantages on some by denying them to others. Elite universities are always in some way aristocratic in temper, born to rule. League tables make the point as emphatically as possible. Only a few can win. There are many lesser players. Some are locked out of the game altogether.

In higher education the zero-sum logic shapes the differentiation of consumption between elite and non-elite institutions, creating unequal opportunity. At the same time it differentiates production, creating uneven quality. Rankings tend to emphasize this vertical stretch. Hierarchy is both necessary to status competition
and continually fostered by it, so that it becomes an instrument of closure strong enough to impose itself on the diversity of higher education and knowledge.

Much critical analysis is focused on the ongoing tensions between commercial and academic values in research (for example Bok, 2003). Arguably, however, commercial research, while economically significant, constitutes a small part of total research time. The more important tension is between open source knowledge production, and the status hierarchy in knowledge and knowledge production fostered by rankings and metrics. Here the hegemony of the leading universities reduces diversity, democratic community and all-round global development.

**Antinomy of the k-economy**

So this then is how we order the higher education part of the knowledge economy: as an antinomy of free knowledge flows and a familiar status hierarchy. The role of capitalism is more modest. It is the third player, tugging at the main antinomy from outside it. As Bourdieu (1988; 1993) suggests, commercial imperatives dominate only at the low status end of higher education, in non research institutions in some nations and the cross-border business of the University of Phoenix and others.

This antinomy of free knowledge flows and the status hierarchy is functional. It makes a coherent system. Is it also a contradiction? If so it is a long-standing one, but its new form is especially potent, mediating a larger role for higher education and knowledge in society. But what an odd couple they are, this nexus of openness and closure, of liberty and necessity! Free imagining sits alongside vertical status, like the imaginings of the architects who designed the mediaeval cathedrals. Status competition assigns value but the open source ecology does not. Status competition is framed by absolute scarcity and zero-sum distribution; the open source ecology is characterized by hyper-abundance and dissemination without limit. Status is bounded and never fully contestable. The elite layer of status-producing universities is almost closed to new entrants (though perhaps the hierarchy is less closed at global than national level: Marginson, 2008). The price of status goods rises with status; but regardless of use value, the price of open source knowledge goods not captured by status is zero. Status rests on reproductive authority. Open source production and dissemination are driven by cultural contents; and in the cyber-world nothing is taken as given and everything is always new. Open source knowledge is ultra-modern while the status hierarchy is pre-modern. They could hardly be more different. Nevertheless both are actively in use. The k-status system of rankings and metrics tells industry where it might invest in knowledge. The leading journals earmark the most authoritative knowledge. But industry also looks directly at the open source domain, which is teeming with ideas that are freely and instantly available. And innovation will continue to source both domains.

The relationship is not one-way. Note the great driver of open source ecology—Internet publishing—is the medium for the evolution of k-status mechanisms. It would be inaccurate to characterize the evolution of the k-status system simply as a process of pushing all that new creativity back inside old hierarchical containers, so that nothing has changed. As well as translating open source knowledge into the
inherited status hierarchy, university rankings and publishing metrics are also translating the old status hierarchy into the Internet age. Given that the medium is the message—some of the time at least—the Internet has left its own stamp on the global hierarchy, somewhat changing its forms. MIT contends with Harvard in the webometrics (2010) ranking, its prowess determined by the number of web pages it inspires. Global communications power becomes one of indicators of rank. This is new and it changes the elite sector somewhat, reducing old barriers between the university and society. In one way the research university becomes more visible and accessible, while in another it is as remote as before. It also becomes more active in impressing us with science—and busier in requiring our deference.

Here again the sheer functional brilliance of the antinomy shows itself. Like all mass media the Internet is a formidable engine in building status. MIT placed its courseware online knowing that the value of the MIT degree would be enhanced rather than diminished. Harvard Faculty of Arts and Science placed all its articles in the public domain on the Internet. In doing so Harvard undermined the copyright protocols inherited from the manufacturing era and endorsed open source knowledge. But Harvard also strengthened itself. With university websites on the Internet even the reproduction of status, once such an exclusive and untouchable operation, assumes the flaky sense of everything-everywhere and popularity-driven messaging that characterize the medium. Venerable gothic institutions look like celebrities. (They evade the boom-bust cycle typical of celebrity culture!) The web identity of Harvard can be instantly appropriated by all at the touch of a screen. It is hard to take the reality television version of Harvard completely seriously. But behind it, not quite reduced, lurks the real bricks-and-mortar Harvard. That is another and a more formidable thing. The reality television version reminds us the real Harvard is there, not just a symbol of learning or an icon of our culture, but one of the motor forces of the world. That is the life-changing institution. The Internet and research rankings have brought its power to the front of our attention.

DIVERSITY IN THE NEW ORDER

The global k-economy order thus defined rests on the imaginary of a single and transparent circuit of knowledge. Yet there are many circuits of knowledge. Knowledge flows are manifest in different cultural fields, language groups and other human communities; their spatiality is mobile and complex, criss-crossed by linkages and punctuated by breaks and islands. The global knowledge economy could never constitute a complete coverage. Outside it there are spaces for other communities of practice, in languages other than English, and with local rather than global reach. But global convergence has ensured that in higher education (though not everything) the global game is dominant. It is because of the centrality of knowledge in higher education, in the context of means of communication in which knowledge can be global. Knowledge is readily global. It is in its nature.

Ranking and the associated performance technologies are the means whereby the global circuit of knowledge is defined for the purpose of human relations, and demarcated from other knowledge. This standardization is a boon—it allows us to
work together—and a disaster, because it suppresses diversity of knowledges (and hence often also diversity of voice) unless that diversity is expressed within the main game. The dominant circuit is codified academic knowledge in the sciences. This is where value is assigned to knowledge in the form of university-mandated status. Other knowledge has no value. But there is creativity there too. There is no justice here—and immense loss. Work in the range of languages, work that challenges accepted disciplinary categories and ways of thought, work from lesser status institutions or outside the universities altogether (most of the great intellectual breakthroughs have been from outside universities) are consigned to the dustbin. In the new universe of global comparison and ordering, a wealth of common knowledge is made known to us. It is also thinned out and pushed away.

Likewise ranking and the other mechanisms of global comparison tend to homogenize institutions. Our historical inheritance suggests there is no one single ‘Idea of a University’. There are different missions, structures and organizational cultures, nested in national and regional contexts and conditions of possibility. In the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, national systems combine university autonomy with explicit central steering. The Nordic university combines inclusive participation, social equity, research culture and institutional autonomy with strong state investment (Valimaa 2004; 2005). The German university opts for elite participation, research culture, and state administration. The Latin American public university fosters high participation, scholarl culture and building the nation-state. The emerging science universities of China, Taiwan China, Korea, and Singapore are produced by state investment and designed to secure global competitiveness. India fosters strong specialist technology and business-focused institutions. Beyond the research university we find high quality vocational sectors in Finland, Germany (Fachhochschulen), France, and other nations. Across the globe, there are online institutions, research institutes and specialized institutions in engineering and the arts. Yet one model towers above diversity—the comprehensive Anglo-American English language science university. This provides the norms used for comparison in ranking systems. If its dominance derives from accumulated knowledge power (in large part owed to three hundred years of Anglo-American world hegemony), the victory has also been “earned” by excluding ideas and works in other traditions.

The implications of normalizing ranking systems for actual existing diversity in higher education—diversity in knowledge, and diversity in institutional template—are the main downside of this new system of valuation and regulation. Early criticism was mounted more against bias effects than reshaping effects, but the latter are more important. One case of the normalizing effects of research counts is the undue subordination of the national public mega-university in Latin America, for example the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and Universidad de Buenos Aires in Argentina (UBA). UNAM and UBA are different beasts to the research specialist universities of 20,000-40,000 in the USA and UK. UNAM and UBA are vast multi-site and multi-mission institutions with a comprehensive social role that historically have played a central part in the evolution of national government and identity. They enrol more than a quarter of a million students and house national cultural institutions and a large part of the
research effort. Important functions of state-building are located in the setting of autonomous institutions that encourage broad-ranging debate. The conglomerate character of UNAM and UBA prevents them from concentrating resources on research and elite formation alone, excluding other activities, so as to maximize focus and reputation, in the manner of, say, Caltech or Princeton. At the same time they experience the major disadvantage that scholarship in Spanish is unrecognized in global rankings. UNAM and UBA appear in the 151-200 bracket of the Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings, though they are more important than that suggests. Worse, the present global rankings make them look incompetent. A national pride becomes a national disgrace. This distinctive model, which is functional in its own terms, is unnecessarily placed in question in the eyes of public and government. These universities might be in need of reform, most universities are, but not a global template-driven reform that deconstructs them at the foundations, severs them from the nation and wipes the virtues accumulated in their history. Global inclusion is positive; global comparison is inevitable and can be salutary; but this kind of comparative outcome is merely a prejudicial exercise of global hegemony.

**Pluralising Regulation**

The new system can be tweaked to begin to compensate for these homogenizing effects. A greater degree of diversity, and some scope for upward mobility within the hierarchical order, can be factored into the means of comparison. Rankings will always elevate and reproduce the power of those who are already strong. But rankings systems can be reworked to incorporate a greater plurality of language, institutional type and mission. Above all, they can include more diverse valuations.

One method is to foreground open source dissemination of science, which facilitates the take-up of science in innovation, undercuts the hierarchy-building effects of ranked publication, and opens the way to linguistic diversity. The early Internet was English dominated but the proportion of webpages and messages that are in English is now declining significantly (netcraft 2008; webometrics 2009). A second method is to develop publication and citation counts that include work in languages other than English. This is being attempted by some rankings agencies, though it is difficult to do, and there is the core issue of the extent to which global counts ought to be confined to global materials or redefined to include nationally bound materials – whether to take a global approach or a multilateral approach. A global approach can function according to a single index of value. A multilateral approach permits a plurality of values. The trade-off for diversity is lost coherence.

A third method is to maximize diversity in classifications, weakening, though not eliminating, the emphasis on comprehensive research universities. In a multi-mission classification scheme, institutions of like mission are compared appropriately. Research-intensive universities, technical vocational institutions, stand-alone business schools and other single-discipline colleges are grouped with their fellows. State-building public universities of the type of UNAM and UBA can be separated out. This enables more precise, less homogenizing comparisons and better identifies the worldwide distribution of capacity in the k-economy. It creates
several hierarchies, rather than one universal hierarchy of institutions. Though the research-intensive university hierarchy will continue to capture primary attention, the other missions are valued. The evolution of a classification for the 4,000 higher education institutions in Europe (van der Wende, 2008) is important. To replicate the approach on a world scale is a formidable challenge, but one within reach.

Fourth, we need to move from composite indicators and single league tables based on one index of value, to more use of single indicators—tailored to purpose—and where hierarchies are used, multiple rather than single league tables. The more space for heterogeneity of valuation, the better.

One example is the work of the Leiden CWTS (2010) on research outcome metrics. Leiden eschewed composite tables that blend together a range of research indicators, in the manner of Shanghai Jiao Tong (SJTUGSE, 2010) and the Taiwan authorities (HEEACT, 2008), to produce a ‘best research university’ table. Leiden issues a set of different tables of leading research universities, according to volume of science papers (quantity), citations per paper (quality) and both volume and quality together (a composite indicator of university ‘fire-power’ in the knowledge economy). Each table generates a different hierarchy of universities; each tells us something different; and all are useful. Likewise, in developing empirically grounded measures of learning outcomes, it is better to use a range of different indicators based on field of study, differing notions of performance (absolute student achievement versus value-added during the program), peer assessment of teaching, student assessment of teaching and so on. The multiple indicators prepared by the German Centre for Educational Development (CHE, 2010) also point in the right direction. The CHE comparisons have managed to evade the resort to league tables altogether. While it is difficult to envisage the disappearance of all league tables of universities, the more league tables there are, and the more diverse that these tables are, the less that any one league table can exercise normalizing effects. Diversity of indicators diminishes the single currency effect that a single dominant league table can create. But diversity enables more complex purpose-built judgements, and avoids the validity problems, gross simplifications and misreadings of meaning that are inherent in the use of composite indicators. Therefore all else being equal a plurality of indicators with transparent assumptions is not only better for those inside higher education—it enables their work to be more accurately understood and valued—it is also better for industry investors, governments and prospective students, for it enables these agents to make finer-tuned judgements about comparative performance and where they need to go.

Finally, the ultimate source of democratization lies in the domain of open source knowledge outside rankings. The more that creativity is sustained and communicated outside the orthodox academic research and publishing circles, the greater the potential for “flat”, plural and inclusive relations of knowledge.

NOTES

1 This chapter was initially prepared as a joint keynote paper (with Marijk van der Wende) for the CHER Conference in Pavia, 11-13 September 2008. Thank you kindly to Marijk and to the Editors.

2 For further discussion see Marginson, 2010a, pp. 121-122; Marginson, 2010b, p. 163.
THE NEW WORLD ORDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

REFERENCES


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EXCELLENCE, QUALITY AND THE DIVERSITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

INTRODUCTION

Excellence is one of the many usable concepts in the area of higher education that are precise enough to evoke a number of positive and sometimes negative emotions, yet vague enough to offer fertile ground for theoretical development as well as empirical research. This chapter argues that there has been a movement in the last thirty years during which the concepts of excellence and its close kin, quality, have changed meaning and content. While they used to refer to an individual quality, or a virtue if one prefers, expressed by the (outstanding) quality of an academic’s work, they have increasingly come to refer to two different organizational characteristics. While ‘excellence’ refers to an outstanding high level of quality that distinguishes the best universities from the rest, ‘quality’ alludes to quality assurance whereby a minimum quality standard is required for a higher education institution to be officially licensed to operate. This puts the two concepts at center stage of the transformation of higher education including the emergence of formally organized higher education systems the last thirty years.

The focus of this chapter is on the relationship between the concept of excellence and the integration of higher education systems. The implications of this process for the organization of the relationship between higher education institutions are crucial. Whereas the ambition of achieving excellence creates a push towards vertical differentiation of higher education systems, the growing inclusiveness of different types of higher education institutions implies a push towards horizontal differentiation.

The chapter is organized as follows: In the next part it gives an overview of some of the major trends in higher education reforms and change processes, including the challenges these trends raise for the integration of higher education systems. This addresses the question of what the topic of the paper is about. The third part deals with the why-question, and looks at some of the forces that shape current higher education systems and how they relate to the idea of excellence. The major dimensions along which higher education systems may be organized and steered are outlined. This will provide a point of departure for an appreciation of the question raised in part four of how these developments unfold in different national contexts. It will be showed how the tensions within systems facilitate variation across countries and how ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’ have become institutionalized in different ways as different characteristics serving distinct purposes. Furthermore in part five the tensions and instability implied by competing ideas about the mission of higher education are analyzed. The chapter
then discusses in part six how individual institutions may respond to systemic integration, and how institutional strategies contribute to the shaping of the systems. Finally it presents an analysis of how the integration of higher education systems may be related to the emergence of a knowledge society, how this development may affect the relationship between educational institutions, and the labor market, and what implications it may have for academic excellence.

TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

As higher education has become ‘massified’ and grown in size it has also become more politically visible, particularly where it is provided by the state. Steeply growing higher education budgets and political visibility have spurred political interest in how higher education institutions are organized and operated. Increasingly higher education has come to be regarded not only as a specific kind of activity but as a system within which each institution (university, college etc.) should contribute to the successful operation of the system as a whole. They have therefore increasingly come to be organized under one common legal and administrative framework. This again means that national macro level steering in order to ensure the efficiency and quality of the system, is becoming more important to policy makers.

The framing of issues related to the operation and organization of higher education has also been influenced by two other developments. Changing beliefs within national governments and among university leaders about how higher education institutions and systems ought to be organized and steered have shaped the understanding of the problems that are central to higher education and the means by which they should be addressed. Particularly salient has been the abandonment of the idea that universities are a specific kind of organizations in favor of the notion that universities are not different from any other kind of organization. They ought to operate like market or quasi-market organizations striving to become entrepreneurial in their approach to teaching and research (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997; Martin & Etzkowitz, 2000; Musselin, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In countries with public higher education systems, this trend is also reflected by the tendency to include universities in general civil service reforms. Such reforms have been deeply affected by New Public Management ideas that emphasize the notion that universities and other civil service agencies should be organized in such a way that they are able to operate as strategic actors in a market place (Bleiklie, 1998; Bleiklie et al., 2010). Another idea that has contributed to shaping policies is the idea that national and international higher education regimes increasingly (should) shape and standardize the conditions under which universities operate in order to achieve political goals (Bleiklie, 2007; Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2002; Dill & Sporn, 1995; Kogan et al., 2006; Levine, 2000; Nowotny et al., 2001).

Government steering of higher education institutions, therefore, has tended to move from direct regulation of individual institutions towards a stronger emphasis on regulating the economic framework conditions under which they
operate (Hood et al., 2004; Paradeise et al., 2009). The following discussion
deals with the development of national higher education systems, the emergence
of macro steering in Europe and the implications of these developments for the
notion of excellence in higher education. The declared purpose of higher
education reformers is to turn universities into dynamic, entrepreneurial high
quality producers of academic excellence. The integration of higher education
systems with this purpose in mind, therefore, confronts policy makers with at
least three important questions. First, how should the relationship between the
institutions be organized? Secondly, along what dimensions should the
integration take place? Thirdly, what are the proper procedures by which
the integration ought to take place? The aim, therefore, is to analyze how policy
makers and influential actors have responded to these questions. The underlying
tension that policy makers try to come to grips with is to combine a system that
is able to provide high quality education on a massive scale for a large section of
the population in a coherent, but at the same time, flexible manner that allows the
system to adapt to changing and diverse needs in society (Teichler, 2005).

PRINCIPLES AND MECHANISMS EXPLAINING DIVERSITY

The relationship between higher education institutions—be it universities, short-
cycle vocational schools or liberal arts colleges—may be understood in terms of two
important dimensions. First, higher education institutions have different functions—
they provide different kinds of education in terms of the subjects they teach (e.g.
scientific disciplines in natural sciences, social sciences and humanities or
professional subjects like law, medicine, dentistry, psychology, engineering,
architecture, nursing, social work, teaching etc.) and cater to different needs for
educated personnel in society. Seen from a functionalist point of view each
education is unique and necessary in order for society as a whole to function
adequately. When we consider different kinds of education from this perspective it
is problematic to judge them against one common denominator in terms of
importance, status or quality. Consequently, all higher education institutions may
be considered equal but different. The variety of higher education institutions in
terms of the types of subjects they teach constitute what Teichler (1988; 2005) calls
horizontal diversity.

Secondly, however, institutions may also be measured against one or a number
of common denominators that form the basis for hierarchies of institutions within
national systems or internationally. Such hierarchies may be based on e.g. ‘quality’
of teaching and research, the kind of advanced degrees an institution provides
(bachelor, master or doctoral level), the educational level of the professoriate (e.g.
percentage of professors holding advanced masters or doctoral degrees), selectivity
at entry, achievement levels of students, professional success of graduates,
pUBLICATION RECORD OF RESEARCHERS, REPUTATION OF RESEARCHERS AND THE LIKE. THE
position of a given institution in the hierarchy is determined by its score on a
specific set of characteristics by which all institutions are evaluated. In this
perspective it follows that some institutions offer education of higher quality than
others. By separating the best from the rest we can identify institutions that are excellent. This ordering of institutions in terms of the kind of criteria mentioned above is called vertical diversity by Teichler (1988; 2005).

In the literature on higher education two views are pitted against one another with regard to the development of the diversity of higher education systems (Meek et al., 1996). One view assumes that systems will converge by gradually acquiring common characteristics as the international trends push them towards a common hierarchical model defined by the academic criteria of the most prominent research universities (Gibbons et al., 1994). If this is true then one should expect one common idea of what excellence is and how it is expressed organizationally to emerge and take hold of higher education systems worldwide. However, it has been argued against the convergence thesis that shared ideologies and notions about how higher education institutions ought to be organized are not enough. New ideas have been spread, interpreted, translated, developed and implemented in highly institutionalized environments in which norms, traditions and a range of peculiarities of single institutions and national systems produce path dependencies that sustain cross national variation by shaping the way in which national policies and systems have responded to these international trends (Bleiklie, 2001; Kogan et al., 2006; Musselin 1999). If this is true one should expect different notions of excellence to take hold in different locations and create local or national standards and organizational expressions of excellence. At the level of higher education systems one may therefore find different models and templates of excellence e.g. a categorical notion: that all institutions publicly recognised or accredited as universities (as opposed to vocationally oriented colleges) by definition are institutions of excellence, a hierarchical notion that a certain number of top institutions in a ranking exercise are classified as excellent, a competitive notion according to which units within institutions or entire institutions compete for funding that gives them status as institutions of excellence.

There are three major mechanisms that contribute to shaping the hierarchies that constitute the vertical diversity of a higher education system: accreditation, ranking and funding. Accreditation processes aim at developing and applying a set of formal criteria in order to formally recognize an institution or a specific department within it as an educational institution at a certain level. To some extent they have replaced binary systems whereby research universities and similar institutions with access to research funds are formally distinguished from teaching oriented institutions with limited or no access to such funds. National accreditation and evaluation agencies have now been established in most West European countries, and one of their main functions is to enforce a set of rules that define the minimum conditions that must be fulfilled by institutions in order to be recognized as teaching oriented colleges, specialised research oriented universities or generalist research universities (Paradeise et al., 2009). The Norwegian national accreditation agency, NOKUT, may serve as an example. Within this accreditation regime institutions are organized in three different categories and levels—universities, specialised universities, and university colleges. For each level NOKUT has specified criteria regarding the level of the degrees (bachelor, masters or doctor) an
institution must give, the kind of degrees that the professors must hold in order to satisfy the conditions for being accredited, and the conditions an institution (e.g. a short cycle college) must fulfil in order to move upwards in the hierarchy and become a university. Accreditation may also be provided by international associations of disciplinary departments or professional schools where the founding institutions agree on certain criteria and make them a condition that prospective new members must fulfil in order to be certified. The common characteristic of accreditation systems is that they establish a set of minimum quality requirements that an educational program or an institution need to fulfil in order to be formally certified. One relevant definition of excellence based on accreditation is that all universities, defining the national pinnacles of national higher education hierarchies, per definition are (or ought to be) recognized as excellent (Slagstad, 2006).

The second mechanism is ranking. Ranking exercises are arrangements whereby institutions are ordered in a hierarchy to identify and separate the best, the excellent institutions, from the rest. One well established example is the US News & World Report annual ranking reports in which American universities are ranked from the top institutions, and top departments within various fields on and down according to a long list of criteria such as tuition, percentage of PhD holders among faculty, selectivity at entry, achievement levels of students, professional success of graduates, reputation of researchers and the like. Well known international examples are the so called Shanghai ranking and the Times Higher Education ranking in which universities world wide are ranked according to specific (slightly different) sets of criteria that aim at measuring quality of education, quality of faculty and research output. In the field of business education international ranking has played an important part for some years (Wedlin, 2006). The reader may already have observed that the criteria used in accreditation and ranking exercises are very similar. The difference lies in the way in which they are used to respectively define minimum standards versus selecting the best in a relative sense.

The third principle is related to competitive funding mechanisms or programs that allocate resources to specific units or research groups located within institutions, that achieve status as ‘centers of excellence’. This kind of funding schemes are increasingly used by national as well as European level funding agencies. Access to research funding has become increasingly important as a component in institutional strategies in order to succeed in accreditation and ranking strategies. The tendency to concentrate funding in the best institutions has also been pushed by governments that see themselves operating under conditions of funding constraints and the simultaneous need to develop excellent institutions in order to make the economy competitive. Among the examples of this kind of mechanism we may point to the German ‘Exzellenzinitiative’ and the recently launched French ‘Grand Emprunt’ both aiming at providing extra research funds for a limited number of institutions that may qualify as excellent. At the level of research groups the Norwegian research council program that funds centers of excellence has been in operation the last eight years. The establishment of the European Research Council represents a similar initiative at the European level,
given the high degree of selectivity and the generous funding that are provided for the chosen few.

The growth and integration of higher education systems are generally characterized by two movements: As the systems expanded they became more comprehensive, and where earlier only universities and specialised university level institutions were included, they now often include all post secondary institutions such as colleges for teacher, engineering, nursing, social worker education and similar institutions in addition to liberal teaching oriented colleges. This has added to the horizontal diversity of the systems. However, increased horizontal diversity within a formally defined system brings institutions that previously did not have any contact into view of one another and often into competition for resources like public money, research grants, the best students or faculty. Horizontal diversity therefore may create a pressure among institutions to define a hierarchy, either by means of competition or by political means that in turn will shape the vertical diversity of a system. The analysis above illustrates that as authorities try to regulate the relationship between institutions horizontally and vertically, they may do so in a variety of ways. The question is how current developments affect the options policy makers have.

Within national systems one frequently finds contradictory policies—for instance attempts at developing and sustaining both elite and mass education—that tend to make them potentially unstable. In other words, both assumptions about convergence and path dependency may seem insufficient as a means for predicting actual future developments within higher education systems. This is emphasized by Teichler’s (2005) observation regarding the Bologna process in Europe. As higher education systems somehow become more structurally similar, the connection between structural characteristics and the content of higher education becomes looser. How higher education systems develop depends on how these contradictions are balanced. This is the topic of the following section.

MACRO STEERING AND TENSION BETWEEN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

In spite of the evidence presented above it is commonplace to assume that the integration of higher education systems has had very specific consequences for the position of institutions in relation to one another and in relation to the state. One standard assumption goes more or less like this. Before the emergence of integrated higher education systems, institutions were relatively autonomous in relation to one another and in relation to political authorities. During the integration process hierarchical orders (based on e.g. accreditation, ranking or reputation) started to emerge. The reason is that organizational integration implies standardization in the sense that a common set of rules and uniform principles for accreditation (e.g. common degree and career structures) or for determining positions in a rank order (e.g. commonly recognized rankings) have been established. The assumption easily follows that the distribution of resources and prestige within higher education systems increasingly will be determined by hierarchical orders, and make them more vertically diverse by concentrating resources in order to promote excellence
in relatively few top institutions. At the same time the horizontal diversity of the system will become less important for how it is organized and how resources are distributed. Ultimately then, higher education systems around the world will gradually become more and more similar to hierarchical higher education systems like the American one.

There are two important political-economic concerns that may push towards such a development. The first concern is that the level of education in the population affects the competitiveness of a nation. The logical implication of this line of reasoning is that the higher the ratio of advanced degrees (e.g. masters and doctoral degrees) in a population, the better. The second concern is that higher education systems need to be flexible in order to be efficient. Therefore, students should have the opportunity to combine a wide array of subjects from different disciplines and institutions, making it easier for them to adapt their education to changing labor market needs. This will make institutions more competitive and efficient, and the candidates they produce will be better prepared for their future professional careers. In order to do this there must be a common degree structure and a common system of student evaluation and grading across all types of education.

Until quite recently however, there where clear distinctions between categories of institutions such as research universities, liberal colleges and short-cycle vocational colleges as well as between institutions within the same categories based on the content and occupational orientation of the education they offered, such as e.g. teacher, engineering and nursing colleges. The degree systems were incompatible and credits not transferrable. In order to address these concerns one has to develop common formal standards. Such standards, like the ones that were mentioned above, have been or are in the process of being established nationally and internationally. In principle this should have paved the way for a transparent system that makes it possible to identify excellent institutions and units and to promote excellence further.

There are ample reasons to believe that the real picture is somewhat more complicated than the above assumptions indicate (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997; Kogan et al., 2006; Musselin, 1999).

Firstly, institutions may try to adapt to the integration process by adopting different strategies. While some institutions may accept the conditions laid down by the increasing importance of hierarchies and vertically diversified systems, others may seek to maintain their autonomy, cultivate their specialties and gain acceptance as representatives of specialized knowledge that is distinguishable first and foremost by fulfilling a specific function rather than occupying a specific position in a hierarchical order. For instance, most excellence initiatives in Europe focus on research excellence and involve in practice a relatively limited number of institutions and research groups. For teaching only institutions and in some cases entire nations ‘excellence’ is an unobtainable goal and even irrelevant to the activities in which the institution is engaged.

Secondly, national systems vary considerably with regard to their degree of hierarchisation both across and within categories of institutions. Teichler (1988, 51–75)
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provides examples of how countries like Australia, Britain, France, Japan and the Netherlands during the 1970s and early 1980s developed quite different structural arrangements for organizing the relationship between categories of institutions within their higher education systems. Whilst the American, English and Japanese systems were considered hierarchical in the sense that there are clear differences in prestige, perceived quality and selectiveness within the same category of institutions (e.g. research universities), the French system was regarded as fragmented between clearly separate educational sectors (elite education in grandes écoles, universities and vocational institutions), the German and Scandinavian systems were seen as examples of non-hierarchic arrangements in which all universities (or institutions within any given category) are considered roughly equal in terms of prestige and quality. Hierarchization based on current excellence initiatives therefore represent a much more radical change of policies and mind sets in the latter two groups of countries than in the former.

Thirdly, knowledge has gained importance in society, amongst other things because of the emergence of mass education and steadily more extensive use of research in private business as well as public administration. This contributes to rendering the interrelations between society and educational institutions more diverse and complicated. The criteria of valuation have become more complex, making it difficult to classify institutions in relation to one another in terms of simple, unambiguous functional or hierarchical principles (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2002; Nowotny et al., 2001).

The argument put forward here is that even if higher education institutions are brought under one formally unitary and hierarchical system, the order and support for academic excellence it promotes will not be equally relevant nor equally normatively powerful for all institutions and all countries affected by it. The two types of order will in all likelihood continue to co-exist, they will be supported and sustained by diverse forces that partly pull in the same direction and partly in opposite directions (Clark, 1983).

The forces that push in the direction of hierarchical systems defined by academic excellence have left visible imprints on policies and institutional landscapes. Yet, institutions are different in a number of important respects because they educate students for different occupations, are rooted in different traditions of education and occupational training and have ties with different parts of the labor market with their corresponding occupational or professional groups. Therefore I would like to point out some characteristics that may limit the reach and effectiveness of the drive for academic excellence throughout higher education systems. The point of departure is the following proposition: Individual peculiarities of higher education institutions are to a considerable extent determined by their relations with the labor market.

Education may in principle mean that students are taught a specific occupational skill, where the content of their education by and large is determined by the specialist principle of what is considered necessary knowledge for the conduct of the occupation. This kind of education, that provides graduates with exclusive access to certain occupations, characterizes (or used to characterize) many short-cycle
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vocational colleges e.g. in nursing or engineering and professional schools in universities. These functional factors are therefore likely to limit the extent to which it is possible to emphasize academic excellence because many institutions are primarily interested in cultivating their peculiar form of occupational training. Furthermore, given the importance of relations with the labor market, these institutions are likely to prefer cultivating particular skills in the future as well. This ambition is also likely to remain strong, possibly stronger than the goal of making the highest possible score in the overall competition for resources, prestige and a position as an institution of excellence.

However, education may also be based on a generalist principle where the purpose is to teach students a specific academic discipline that provides no other specific occupational knowledge than teaching and research within the discipline itself. The value of this kind of education on the labor market beyond the specific research and teaching qualifications, usually turns into more general abilities which may be useful in a range of different occupations. I am referring to such qualities as the ability to work independently, to plan and to collect, analyze and present large quantities of information about complex subject matters. These abilities tend to be cultivated by academic disciplines particularly in the so called ‘free faculties’ in arts and sciences. Thus the drive for academic excellence is confronted by a set of functional mechanisms that create tensions and a potential for instability. This makes it easy to understand that the drive plays out differently under different conditions. Some of the factors that affect actual outcomes are considered in the next section.

TENSIONS AND INSTABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION MISSIONS

Higher education system are shaped accordingly by forces that promote academic hierarchy and by forces that promote the (horizontal) diversity of particular educational institutions and types of education. The tensions between these forces are dynamic and make higher education systems sensitive to change in the environment such as changing requirements of the labor market. These tensions therefore constitute important conditions for academic excellence, how it is understood and cultivated. Therefore it is worthwhile to look closer at how the conditions for hierarchies and academic excellence as opposed to functional diversity may vary and at some of the dimensions along which this variation takes place:

a) Variation across disciplines or subject areas may be illustrated by the difference between degree studies in arts and sciences or liberal undergraduate college education on the one hand as opposed to professional degree studies in medicine, law and engineering or short-cycle vocational college education on the other. The aim of the former is to educate students in disciplines that may be combined with other subjects in a degree study that constitutes a complete education through which students acquire general skills that may qualify them for a number of different occupations. The aim of the latter is to educate students for specific occupations, but in addition the education also represents the way in which
new recruits qualify for membership and are introduced to a community of practitioners. Members of the occupation or the professional association may also take an interest in and try to influence educational programs and capacity in order to improve the quality and regulate supply and protect the market position of the profession. Thus education becomes an asset in a social setting in which it may be instrumental to the protection of jurisdictions of professional groups and educational institutions and their allied educational institutions (Abbott, 1988). In the former case education lends itself to the cultivation of excellence in a general academic sense. In the latter case education is embedded in a set of relations that promote diversity and may not as easily be part of a push for academic excellence.

b) Variation over time takes place as the notions about the mission of higher education evolve. During the 1980s, there was a drive in many countries in the Western world to make higher education more efficient and vocationally oriented. The argument gained acceptance that society needed more manpower skilled for clearly specialized occupational roles, rather then generalists. This justified an expansion of short-cycle vocationally oriented studies, particularly in business administration (Berg, 1992; Gellert & Rau, 1992; Lamoure & Lamoure Rontopoulou, 1992; Neave, 1992; Pratt, 1992; Vabø, 1994). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this argument was turned on its head by educational reformers, arguing that what society needed was a work force as highly qualified as possible. In an intensively competitive, mobile and knowledge driven economy, a flexible, highly qualified, independent and entrepreneurial work force is called for. The best way to achieve this goal was to produce as many candidates as possible at the highest possible level of qualification. This argument justified renewed emphasis on graduate education, particularly at the doctoral level (Bleiklie et al., 2000) and facilitated the promotion of a hierarchical notion of academic excellence.

c) Variation across countries demonstrates that there are distinct educational traditions in which countries differ as to the importance and prestige that is accorded to vocational specialization versus generalist qualifications. The education system as well as occupational life may reflect this in various ways. Leadership selection is one case in point. Whereas German industry leaders traditionally have been technical experts (engineers), English leaders have tended to have a generalist liberal arts education, preferably from top universities like Oxford or Cambridge. It is also consistent with this observation that the English funding reform designed to promote excellence, the Research Assessment Excercise, was introduced as early as 1985/86, whereas the Germans launched their Exzellenzinitiative twenty years later in 2006 (Bleiklie & Lange, 2010; Kogan et al., 2006). This also illustrates that the degrees of ‘specialization’ and ‘generalization’ are not given inherent characteristics of an education or an occupation, but reflects how they are socially constructed. These differences are based on specific links between educational system, occupational roles and labor market that are institutionalized and shaped differently according to peculiar national traditions.

Integration of higher education systems whereby higher education institutions are brought under common public, legislative and budgetary systems, contributed
to the development of more hierarchical structures. Formal criteria have been developed and introduced in order to formalize a rank order, through accreditation systems, funding systems and ranking exercises. The tendency has also been boosted by NPM reforms that have aimed at concentrating research funding in the best performing institutions (Bleiklie et al., 2010). Several European countries (England, Germany and Norway) made early attempts at organizing their higher education systems by introducing binary divisions in the 1960s. However, the divisions tended to break down over time, both in the sense that short cycle courses became integrated parts of university degrees and because institutions in the college sector tried to introduce university level degrees and a research component. The tendency the last twenty years has been to loosen up binary systems with low or non-existent permeability, in order to permit higher mobility within national systems. This is consistent with the goal of flexibility and to keep educational opportunities open for excellent students throughout the system to advance to higher levels. In addition it opens up opportunities for institutions that want to advance academically to do so. At the supranational level attempts at formal integration—e.g. by the 46 countries that have signed the ‘Bologna declaration’—have aimed at standardizing the degree structure across institutions and countries, opening the systems to competition and cross national mobility. The outcome is that today’s hierarchies tend to become increasingly fine graded depending on a number of criteria of excellence typical for ranking exercises.

Many objections that may be raised in connection with integration of higher education systems may be understood as reactions from disciplinary and professional groups that feel pressured by authorities’ attempts at imposing a set of academic criteria used for evaluation, distribution of funding and assigning of formal status that are alien to them. Another set of objections may be caused by assumed or experienced negative effects of institutional mergers of previously separate universities, liberal and/or vocational colleges that may bring together radically different educational models with very different notions of excellence. Such mergers have happened in one form or another in countries like Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, Sweden and the UK among others. In Norway a number of short-cycle vocational institutions operating according to a specialized model experienced mergers under an academic hierarchical model as threatening. Traditional teacher colleges, emphasizing practical pedagogics, were not too happy at the prospect of being judged by their contributions to academic research (Halvorsen & Michelsen, 2002). A number of practically oriented institutions may thus feel threatened by being integrated in a system where they are supposed to find their place in a hierarchically organized setting according to criteria that are alien to them. To the extent that an institution includes vocationally oriented programs providing skills in demand from specific businesses or client groups, the introduction of evaluation criteria that focus on research are more likely to face resistance. Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine that important interests in society are likely to be more interested in the ability of candidates to meet the practical requirements of a profession than in their academic excellence. Thus it is easy to understand why the emerging and increasingly influential concept of
academic excellence may face opposition as it faces competing conceptions based on vested interests and established coalitions of sometimes powerful actors.

However, integration into a higher education system where all institutions may compete for the same resources based on a common set of criteria may also be seen as a set of new opportunities. Vocational and other shorter cycle institutions may attract new groups of students when it becomes easy to integrate college education with graduate education at a university. The likelihood for this to take place is also affected by the transition from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, the changes it entails for occupational life and how this in turn affects the educational system. As an increasing number of occupations are based on higher education, depend on research based knowledge and produce research based products, norms of academic excellence are more likely to be accepted as standards also for occupational oriented educations. Thus the interaction of higher education systems organized in an academic hierarchy based on academic excellence and an occupational life of an emerging knowledge economy may provide a mutually reinforcing push for academic excellence as a standard that is valid inside and outside academic institutions.

SYSTEMIC INTEGRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Although the above conclusion may adequately grasp a general tendency, we may assume that the way in which institutions react to systemic integration depends on the extent to which they see their interests better served by an integrated system organized according an academic hierarchy. This does not necessarily mean that institutions merely look for a better deal in terms of resources, prestige and strategic alliances. Traditions and identity may be equally important for educational institutions when they form their opinion about integration and their strategies for responding to it. The main point here is that motives aside, I assume that actors are goal oriented and that their attitude toward integration is determined by what they believe serves their interests and is compatible with their values. Tensions between theoretical qualifications that serve as criteria for establishing an academic hierarchical order and the demand for practical skills is something that one may find in many educational settings, from high level academic and professional programs to more practically oriented short-cycle vocational training. Such tensions mean that it is not easy to predict how institutions will respond to reforms aiming at institutional integration.

Although it may be difficult to predict the exact course of future developments, one may be quite confident that the tension between hierarchical and functional principles will live on. The tension is not just found between traditional research universities and vocationally oriented institutions. We find the same tension within research universities as well, clearly expressed for instance during the previously mentioned attempts at ‘vocationalization’ of university education during the 1980s. However, there are important differences between traditional research universities and colleges, as well as between different types of colleges as to how such tensions are expressed and dealt with.
In relation to the formally fragmented state that higher education institution found themselves in, the current systemic integration means three things. The introduction of unitary degree and qualification structures clearly imply increased vertical diversity based on principles determined by research universities. Growing formal rationality in Weberian terms is part and parcel of the formalization and standardization that follows from the process of integration. This again means that academic ideals with their theoretical and methodological requirements increasingly form the basis of valuation and positions within the system. However, academic hierarchies are open to mobility on several levels. Student mobility has been facilitated at the European level as well as nationally by such measures as the introduction of a standardized system for credits (ECTS). Modularization implies a break with traditional rather idiosyncratic study programs that have been common in a number of countries by breaking the programs down into what is intended to be formally comparable units in a way that greatly facilitates student mobility across institutional and national borders. While these developments may satisfy the institutionalized interests of top universities and open up attractive opportunities for non-university institutions, they may also imply an imposition of irrelevant and even harmful criteria of excellence upon institutions that do not fit well to the dominant academic criteria. The danger to higher education systems may be that a large part of their institutions and educational programs are evaluated in terms of criteria that are irrelevant for the education and skills they provide as well as for the working life that depends on the services these systems deliver.

**CONCLUSION**

The developments addressed in the previous discussion do not answer the initial question about whether we can expect a convergence of higher education systems integrated by means of academic hierarchical principles emphasizing vertical diversity. Nor do we know the extent to which the development of national systems will follow different trajectories depending on how they traditionally have solved tensions between specialization and general education, and between different ideas about the mission of higher education in relation to the labor market.

Although the integration of higher education systems has played out differently in individual countries, there is little doubt that integration and more clearly articulated hierarchization have proceeded and become more prominent over the years. Consequently, the development implies a move away from functionally specialized towards more hierarchical and horizontally permeable systems. The tendency is most clearly pronounced at the level of ideologies and formal organizational structures. For non-university institutions it will make a difference whether the system as a whole experiences a massive ‘academic drift’ and moves in the direction of the research university model, or whether such a movement only affects parts of the system, for instance only academically oriented liberal colleges, as opposed to more short-cycle vocationally oriented colleges. The former alternative indicates that non-university colleges will eventually become integrated in a vertically diversified regime based on academic standing. The latter alternative
indicates that vertical diversity based on the research university model will contribute to systemic fragmentation rather than integration. This may result in a de facto two-tiered system of institutions in which some institutions take part in the academic competition and strive for excellence, while others are left out. We know from European comparative studies that the size of the sector that is left out will vary across nations. The uneven distribution of visible research universities in international ranking exercises is also indication that the size of the sector for which the competition for excellence may seem of little relevance is highly correlated with economic development and available resources.

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EXCELLENCE, QUALITY AND DIVERSITY


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