

## **Competing Higher Education Futures in a Globalising World**

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### **Introduction**

The 'Globalising World' in the title of this article is well-represented in the themes of recent European conferences for senior decision-makers (e.g. politicians, heads of institutions, senior managers) wishing to share experiences and views on challenges and opportunities for higher education. Examples of these conferences include *Going Global* (2006) and the *Guardian Higher Education Summit* (2007). Such events tend to focus on pressing questions such as these, posed by the UK Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education:

What we can do on a global basis to increase access to education? How do we ensure high-quality provision? And what do we need to do to achieve the Lisbon agenda for the EU to become the most competitive region in the world; whilst at the same time not taking the resources developing countries need? (Rammell, 2006).

They offer few explicit examples of the differences in perspectives suggested by the first part of the title: 'Competing Higher Education Futures' and represented by the work of Futurists (Miller, 2007; Milojevic, 2005; Rhoades *et al.*, 2004; Slaughter, 1999; Vincent-Lancrin, 2004). To illustrate, Vincent-Lancrin identifies six Futurist scenarios, each of which could be pursued by at least one university in a country, competing with efforts of other universities promoting other scenarios:

1. a traditionalist scenario that slows or halts moves to mass education, marketisation, distance teaching (use of ICTs) and lifelong learning
2. an embrace-change scenario, bringing in private funding under the control of the Higher Education institutions
3. a market-led scenario, in which organisations concentrated on specialist niches, where they could be market leaders, coupled with international partnerships, outsourcing of much publicly funded science, and productivity-enhancing use of ICT for teaching
4. a continuing professional development and lifelong learning scenario, with universities certifying courses but with other traditional university functions moved to the private sector
5. a learner-led scenario, in which learners design their own lifelong learning and source the components from a global network of universities and industry partners

6. an informal learning scenario, in which formal tertiary education disappears.

Futurists increasingly aim to base their views on replicable methodologies for assessing available data and generating and assessing feasible and likely scenarios, some of which anticipate structural or radical change.

To judge from their presentations and questions, many higher education leaders are either unaware of such work (and by implication, do not plan for those futures), or discount the value of that work and prefer to plan for a Simple Extrapolated Future (SEF), with today's trends continuing, but no other factors at work.

SEF-type planning is reliant on '... predictive approaches rooted in trend analysis, forecasting models, multi-factor calculations, etc. [which] are tightly integrated with the way risk is managed and decisions taken in industrial society ... [although] the world around us today, in its evolving conceptual and practical attributes, is creating a context that, on the one hand, is dispensing with industrial era modes of perpetuating systemic stability, risk management, decision making, etc. and, on the other hand, is embracing complexity, heterogeneity and spontaneity as opposed to simplification, homogeneity and planning' (Miller, 2007). Scenarios that allow for complexity, heterogeneity and spontaneity can be expected to be very different in nature and potential impact from those based on trend analysis.

An example of a general complexity-creating factor is focusing on the achievement of routine targets (according to the dictum 'what gets measured, gets done'), and in so doing, missing weak signals of coming major change, which eventually grow into large signals that threaten organisational survival or even human survival (Slaughter, 1999; 2007). An example of a complexity-creating factor that is specific to higher education would be the emergence of low-cost or no-cost ways for libraries, students, teachers and researchers in developing countries to gain access to the knowledge resources (intellectual property, tools, networks, communities) routinely available to their counterparts in the developed world. The 'digitise the world' goals of Internet search companies such as Google and the priority given to Open Educational Resources by UNESCO and the Hewlett Foundation are indicators that global access to such resources is in prospect. This could change the rate and scope of capacity-building in the developing world and would be supported by higher education institutions whose mission includes the promotion of global understanding and tolerance, as part of their ethical responsibilities to less-favoured groups around the world — sometimes called Global Citizenship.

Areas of particular importance for capacity-building in the developing world include *information-sourcing* (access to a widening range of information sources, eventually including some found today only in elite research universities and the R&D departments of multinationals); *capability-enhancing technologies*, including tools for *information-processing* (e.g. evaluating sources and identifying which ones are most reliable and relevant); and *sense-making* (e.g. determining what points of view are represented by each source, and in what ways those sources are relevant for local needs).

Such developments could lead to Miller's 'spontaneity and radical change' in higher education through a multi-stage process:

1. The emergence of community-developed tools enabling students and teachers to process the information available to them and share their insights without mediation or censorship by others, so that they can not only make sense of information from elsewhere in the world, but also put it to immediate and possibly novel use (the Wisdom of Crowds).
2. The adoption of such tools by large numbers of people, as part of the growth of Social Computing, Peer-to-Peer learning, and learner-led Communities of Purpose.
3. Peer-to-Peer learning becomes an important complement to formal teaching, giving many developing-world communities far wider access to mentors across the world, drawn from their diaspora and from higher education generally.

The implications of such developments are unpredictable, since each improvement makes it easier to spot ways to make additional improvements; those changes could lead to others, not yet imagined, and could speed up the rate of change (positive feedback). Researchers are exploring the ways in which such processes could lead to Cognitive Augmentation, both in a learning context and more generally. More futuristic follow-on developments have been described, based on breakthroughs that lead to limited Intelligence Amplification. Because of positive feedback, users of each generation of amplification technology would become more able to design the next generation, so that users (or their computers) would rapidly have sufficient intelligence to design computers with super-human intelligence. There would be no going back. This scenario is termed the ‘Singularity’ (Vinge, 1993).

A Simple Extrapolated Future (SEF) does not allow for even modest forms of positive feedback, let alone major changes such as multi-generation Intelligence Amplification. Today’s stereotype SEF for higher education has the following elements:

- more concentration of research resources, and more discretion in all areas of teaching and research, in elite institutions
- higher competition to study or work in those institutions or to collaborate with them (winner-take-all)
- more difficulty for other institutions to recruit and retain the most capable university teachers and researchers
- pressure on those other institutions to reduce or eliminate blue-sky research, to undertake contract research and teaching, to move further in the direction of the mercantilisation of knowledge (What use is it? What can it be sold for?)
- pressure on them to accept massification, to concentrate on teaching and to cut the cost of teaching by sharing course components and systems (Open Educational Resources, Open Source Tools), reducing the need for courses to be created and administered locally
- teaching-focused universities become less visible than research-led universities and have to spend proportionately more to brand and market their courses
- more private-sector competition in vocational areas
- more pressure for employability of graduates
- pressure to increase student satisfaction with teaching and facilities

- less public funding per student
- higher fees per student
- more pressure for improved services and higher value-for-money
- a growing need to provide remedial classes for students who enter university with a low level of competence in mathematics, science, and essay writing.

That SEF has winners and losers. Their individual Futures will draw upon different elements of a vision for higher education as a whole. Box 1 shows an example of one such sectorial vision.

### **Box 1. The ‘all against all’ Vision of Higher Education**

#### COMPETE EFFECTIVELY OR DIE

The most prestigious European universities occupy a winner-take-all position: they attract and retain the many world-class scholars who are globally-connected but prefer European culture. This maintains or increases their global reputation and influence, their privileged access to resources and funding opportunities, and their ability to compete effectively with the best universities elsewhere in the world.

A significant gap opens between those top-ranked universities and slightly weaker European universities, which gradually lose funding, reputation and influence, and become less competitive. The main initial driver of this gap is competition in key areas targeted by North American universities, such as attracting those students from the developing world judged most likely to become leaders in their countries. Such students are offered scholarships at a level that only top-ranking European universities can aspire to.

Mid-range European universities experience even more pressure, because they cannot adapt fast enough to globalisation. Weaker universities in this category lose many of their foreign students, and with them, much income, so courses run at a loss. Some of the foreign students they lose are focused on price, and choose low-cost courses run at nearby regional hubs. Other students are focused on quality, and choose the best courses they can afford: from prestigious European universities if possible, but if not, then courses leading to globally-recognised qualifications from respected providers from outside Europe, such as Australia. Yet other students focus on employability, and choose courses that are more up-to-date, and more vocational than is common in Europe.

Europe’s mid-ranking technical universities are particularly affected; they lose a significant part of their R&D income, and, with it, their capacity to refresh their courses and their equipment, when China and India start to exploit their massive past investment in sending their nationals to the West for

training: their best technical universities consistently match or surpass European technical universities in bids for R&D projects, on key measures such as technical and scientific prowess, creativity, response time, overall cost and value-for-money.

For the lowest-ranking universities, the competitive landscape, already stark, gets steadily worse over the following decade, with a large fall in demand from overseas students, accompanied by the large-scale entry to the world market of low-cost courses from respected higher education institutions in Tiger economies such as China, India and Singapore, some of which make use of European-originated Open Educational Resources, allowing them to avoid much of the effort needed to establish high-quality courses.

### **Whose Future Is It Anyway?**

The kinds of scenarios that senior managers in education conceive of and prepare for depend in part on their institution's goals (e.g. to assist in capacity-building in the developing world, thereby to reduce its dependence on the developed world; or to maintain or increase long-term dependence on the developed world, thereby to maximise income from the developing world).

The Box 1 scenario is based on a dominant narrative in higher education: a polite global 'war of all against all', with increasing materialism, competition between students for places in high-status institutions, and competition between institutions for resources and prestige. This war is mostly to the advantage of the developed world. It has some winners in the developing world, but many losers (Marginson, 2004).

Is this a future we want? Even the winners (high status institutions) must surely wonder. For the others, competition is so intense that the liberalising role of higher education is at risk and courses become increasingly instrumental, more like 'practical training for a globalised marketplace' (Milojevic, 2005).

According to Milojevic, what is important is not whether scenarios like the one in Box 1 accurately describe the outcomes of a 'war of all against all', but what happens to the world as a whole if such wars are the norm. If policies and actions have too narrow measures of success (e.g. focus on the pay-off for sectional interests, such as the interests of the most powerful, rather than the impact for all groups), this leads to poorly-grounded scenarios which fail to include the feelings and actions of weaker groups. The risks of omitting those groups from consideration include increases in their despair, leading to the suicide bombings that are now so common.

Not all the choices made here (what to include, what to exclude) are deliberate. Some are the result of a lack of understanding and attention: we literally need to re-cognise (re-think) what we are seeing, before we can notice it. This was a recurrent theme of a recent UNESCO conference, 'New Ignorances, New Literacies: Learning to Live Together in a Globalizing World' which touched upon a very important question: in the many disputes between East and West, North and South, are we facing a clash of civilizations or rather a clash of ignorances? And if the answer is a clash of ignorances, do we have sufficient understanding of each

other's position to hear what is being said? As one of the speakers observed, 'Today's so-called dialogue (in which all of us are engaging) is not a dialogue at all, but a form of talking past each other and fighting for economic space . . . Better governance is also needed. . . . But good governance is not simply a matter of eliminating corruption and crony capitalism. It must, as Mahatma Gandhi said, put the last first . . . and . . . nurture local enterprise' (Khosla, 2004).

One type of poorly-grounded scenario excludes issues, questions, perspectives and narratives that are known to be viewed by some as highly relevant and important, yet are unpopular with sponsors. This is often the fate of discussions of the type mentioned by Khosla. It is also true of issues that become politicised (e.g. energy use in higher education — a decade or so ago, papers on this by university administrators tended to focus on local impact, seen in purely financial terms, as in 'How can we reduce our utility bills?', but now it has been elevated to a political issue, as in 'How can we reduce concerns about Global Warming?').

Additional criticisms of Box 1 that could validly be made include the omission of competing paradigms and narratives (e.g. giving priority to other issues than financial survival, or mentioning minority narratives put forward by indigenous, feminist and spiritual groups, or narratives that sponsors do not want to hear (e.g. because they are based on or suggest a risk of unwelcome outcomes).

For commentators such as Marginson and Miller, a further deficiency of scenarios such as in Box 1 is that they do not make explicit use of scenario-building techniques that are appropriate for complex and ambiguous situations (e.g. situations where there is potential disagreement about whose interests to consider), nor is it easy to use them for deeper analysis and decision-making.

Ideally, therefore, scenarios and tasks for higher education would be developed with due attention to the complexity of the issues, consulting all affected groups for their views (including those who are normally excluded from consideration, as well as those who are normally included), and taking care to make sure that groups were not talking past each other (Khosla, 2004). Definitive information would need to be gathered on the following:

- who are the key actors in a globalising world (e.g. the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised? Or only powerful groups? Meaning top-tier universities; private sector investors; multinationals able to establish R&D centres and university partnerships anywhere in the world; regions of the developing world with substantial resources, applied in a focused way to build capacity).
- the policies, missions, goals, etc of each type of actor
- what leverage each type of actors has (or feels they have) over events, and how this plays through into the kinds of Futures (Scenarios) they are planning for.

Story-telling and scenario-building methods would then be chosen to match particular tasks, as well as the assumptions of each group about internal-external factors.

To illustrate the latter point, imagine a simple  $2 \times 2$  matrix of views of individual managers about Higher Education Futures. One axis is optimism-pessimism (as to what the future holds for them and their institution). The other axis on this crude model is 'in-control'-'powerless'.

Managers at the in-control end act as if they believe that:

- they can handle any changes in their external environment;
- most changes will be predictable (e.g. because they have privileged notice of changes, or because changes will be incremental rather than radical)
- changes will be slow enough to spot and plan for, and manageable using their existing resources.

At the powerless end are managers who act as if they have weaker sources of information about changes, little power to influence changes, and insufficient resources to cope with changes.

Here is a fictitious scenario: managers at both extremes are each required to undertake their own project on Globalisation. They hold radically different views, but each of them finds their views are confirmed by experience. How so? Those managers who have an optimistic, in-control mindset welcome challenges regardless of topic and choose globalisation projects that are likely to succeed. In contrast, those who are of a pessimistic, powerless frame of mind, fear globalisation and subconsciously choose projects that are likely to fail quickly so that they can say 'I told you so' at little cost. If those outcomes are mirrored in reality, this has clear implications for how projects are chosen and managed.

### **Becoming Global Citizens**

University managers need to be aware of changes in the attitudes and background knowledge of candidates for undergraduate places, so that they can cut expenditure where it is no longer needed, and increase it in other areas where it is needed to achieve their planned-for institutional futures.

As an example, and partly as a result of massification, many universities now run remedial courses for new undergraduates in order to provide them with the knowledge and skills that were commonplace when only the elite of school leavers went on to higher education. Remedial classes are run in science, maths, English language and study skills. At issue is whether classes need to be run in general knowledge, including the kinds of knowledge expected of Global Citizens. At present, students from some regions and schools have a high level of ignorance about cultures in other countries and are at a huge disadvantage in dealing with people from those countries. This is true of adults too, even in countries that spend a great deal on basic education (e.g. the US). The evidence includes low percentages of adults in English-speaking countries with functional competence in a foreign language, and poor performance on tests of general knowledge about major countries around the world (their geography, history, currency, politics, etc). One factor here is a low level of direct experience of visiting other countries, or meeting people from other countries, face-to-face or online.

To counter this, and in accordance with government policies on the need to raise awareness of such matters, schools in the developed world are exposing their students to structured introductions to life in other countries, including the developing world. When those students begin to enter higher education, the need for remedial courses may decline.

What do Globalisation initiatives look like in schools? For some years, the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has been promoting awareness of the need to think and act globally amongst all those closely involved with schools, most obviously children, their families and their teachers (whose in-service courses were updated accordingly). To give a flavour of this, in 2005, the DEST sent its schools a poster that included the message in Box 2, ostensibly from a child in an Australian school:

**Box 2. Australian poster on the theme of globalisation**

WE ARE THE FUTURE

We will be alive in 2050! My school says we need to be global citizens. Do you know what that means? Imagine our world. Wherever we live and work, in Australia or internationally, the setting will be multi-national, multi-cultural and multi-faith. And by the time we are 20, the Asian region will be the focus of our world. China, Japan and India will be our major trading partners and the world's leading economies. Chinese and Indians will make up half of the world's population. Consider them our fellow global citizens, business partners and competitors. Communicating across cultures will be an essential skill in our country. We'll need to learn about Islam at school as Indonesia is our closest neighbour. We need to work together to look after our shared environment. Do you know what an international curriculum looks like? We will study Shakespeare and Tim Winton, Buddhist texts from India, Japanese design and the history of China. We want the world to be a beautiful place for our grandchildren. Our teachers are important because they tell us how to deal with the future — the long, long future.

Text adapted from Beare, H. *Creating a Future School*, Routledge Farmer 2000.

While the school-based implications are clear (students will encounter new ideas, new cultures), what is not mentioned is the potentially difficult issue of whether and how students could share those ideas with their parents and other elders. The challenge in many parts of the world is to enable families and community groupings to develop a shared understanding and tolerance of the new ideas that schools and universities are introducing when they move towards a globalised curriculum, rather than for the newly educated youth to become permanently distanced from their elders. This is especially problematic when rapid change in being imposed on traditional cultures. For example, as observed in an Asian context: 'Societies today want their young to be somehow innovative and become successful in a future knowledge society or global economy, yet at the same time retain acquiescence to traditional values of the past, of conformity, and of self-sacrifice for the common good (social)' (Richards, 2004, p. 341).



### **‘The Challenge is Keeping up with Dubai’**

This quotation is from the director of a leading and highly successful higher education institution operating in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — one of the world’s richest and fastest-developing regions, with a huge rate of new constructions and an enormous appetite for the latest technology, best infrastructure and best education for its citizens (Emiratis) that money can buy. Massive investment in higher education has led to enormous social progress (Wagie & Fox, 2005). The UAE’s commitment to education dates from its earliest days: the late president H.H. Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahayan was often quoted as saying that: ‘The wealth of any nation is its intellectuals and the progress of peoples and nations is judged by the level and extent of education they reach’ (Al-Nahayan, 2007).

Not surprisingly, there is much competition from foreign universities operating in and near Dubai to meet the substantial local demand for higher education. The market includes Emiratis, many of whom choose free courses at public universities, and also a much larger number of more skilled expatriates who have to pay for their courses and are keen to do this; they must add to their qualifications regularly because gaining their next employment contract depends on the freshness and quality of their qualifications, as well as the depth of their expertise and the breadth of their experience.

The expatriate market is discerning and highly competitive, so Dubai offers a remarkable test bed for higher education. Approaches similar to Vincent-Lancrin’s second, third and fourth higher education scenarios are being explored aggressively by over 40 public-sector and private-sector institutions from the US, Australia, UK, France and numerous other countries.

The UK might be assumed to have an early-mover advantage in offering UK-certified courses locally, given its strong historical links with the region (Rabi, 2006), and the past tendency for the region’s elite to study at leading UK universities. Indeed, UK suppliers of English Language teaching and certification have a strong presence in the region. But the picture is different at degree level.

The US dominates the market, perhaps because its technological leadership is so desirable, or because its proponents are so forceful in their fervour to introduce American methods and curricula and believe so strongly in their merit (Said, 1993). Australasian universities are close behind (from Australia, Singapore).

Singapore is establishing a special relationship with the UAE because they share common interests and challenges. For example, Singapore’s students share many of the rote-based approaches to learning with the UAE, yet Singapore has become a technological power-house, growing more creative by the year (Koh, 2005).

A number of UK universities and a smaller number of universities from elsewhere in Europe operate in the region. Some have chosen to partner commercial providers or local universities rather than set up their own operations in the region (Morris, 2005). An example is the Arab Open University, which offers distance learning courses created by the UK Open University and localised to meet regional needs.

### **Employability in a Globalised World**

Khosla (2004) asks ‘What is the most basic need of all? Jobs and livelihoods’. Yet ‘In the globalized economy it costs something of the order of 100,000 dollars to

create one job in industry . . . it means that you need ten times the Indian GNP just for creating workplaces every year. With no money left over for anything else: food, water, clothes, houses — anything. So evidently, they will not be created and every year, there will be more and more jobless people’.

According to the Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Juan Somavia, the ‘global decent work deficit’ is ‘perhaps the single most important underlying threat to peace and stability around the world today’ (Somavia, 2006). ILO studies show that ‘seen through the eyes of the vast majority of men and women around the world, globalization has not met their simple and legitimate aspirations for decent jobs, livelihoods and a better future for their children’. Unemployment is highest amongst the young, leading to trends that are not only ‘morally unacceptable’ but ‘politically unsustainable’. For Somavia, people need ‘fair globalisation’, meaning ‘a fair chance at a decent job’.

Despite the wealth of the UAE and nearby countries and the region’s rapid economic development, there is a risk that increases in its birth rate will outstrip the rate of creation of jobs. This is already a problem in nearby Saudi Arabia, where more than half the population is under 21. The local graduates are facing stiff competition from world-class expatriates attracted by high pay rates. Surveys showed that ‘Over 60% of those with arts qualifications were in employment, whereas less than half of respondents with scientific qualifications were employed, perhaps because the latter had become too specialized, and there were no jobs available in these fields’ (Bosbait & Wilson, 2005). The mass of unemployed Saudi nationals seeks ‘fair globalisation’ and is pushing for changes that will deliver it. ‘Changes are coming not only from the authorities above, but also from below, driven by this young and increasingly urban generation. Even as some of them jealously guard parts of the status quo and display a zeal for their Islamic faith unseen in their parents’ generation, others are recalibrating the balance between modernity and tradition, directing bursts of new energy at civil society and demanding new political and social rights’ (Molavi, 2006).

Unemployment amongst school-leaver and graduate nationals is growing across the region (Bosbait & Wilson, 2005, Kabbani & Kothari, 2005). This is particularly problematic for women graduates: few find salaried employment after graduating, perhaps because there are not many workplaces that meet the criteria that their families insist upon.

Clearly, the UAE wishes to avoid the employment problems (and consequent political problems) of Saudi Arabia. Hence it is giving much attention to job creation schemes for graduates (Anon., 2000). The experience of Singapore in developing an entrepreneurial culture in which large numbers of jobs can be created at low cost is potentially relevant for the growing proportion of women graduates in the UAE who are interested in home-based self-employment (Choo, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The true test of Higher Education Futures is what they provide to students and society at large, rather than what they provide by way of course income to the university. One key requirement is that graduates should not end up without work. The European Union may well have to deal with its own graduate jobs crisis if its industrial strategy fails to deliver the increased competitiveness envisaged in the

Lisbon goals. The proposed European Institute of Technology, EIT, may help at the high end (major innovations), but those innovations will take time to feed through into salaried jobs. If European Higher Education is to maintain or increase its competitiveness, it must excel in areas to do with employability and job creation.

Dubai and the rest of the UAE offer an excellent competitive environment for trials of variants on today's European approaches, more oriented to local learning practice (e.g. rote learning) and delivering post-course success (jobs). The competition to beat in Dubai are universities from Singapore, offering advice on study skills and entrepreneurship; and from the US and Australia, offering industrially-recognised courses, advanced technology, and courses on innovation and entrepreneurship.

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