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Introduction - Higher education and its clients: Institutional responses to changes in demand and in environment

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Introduction

Over a few decades, all over the world, higher education institutions have been confronted with new demands in a number of areas. They have responded to them more or less rapidly, more or less willingly, according to national and local circumstances. These demands were expressions of deep changes in society and in the roles assigned by it to universities. In a world where knowledge was becoming the essential resource to foster and sustain economic development, they were increasingly expected not only to produce new knowledge but also to apply it to production by taking part into the innovation process. They were asked to train a growing number of highly skilled people, the knowledge workers, prepared to constantly update their skills to make the most of the outcomes of research.

These aspirations were accompanied, in most developed countries, by a substantial financial effort from public budgets and private sources. By bringing the attention to bear on higher education institutions, they also made them accountable to society at large. As long as these new demands remained on the boundaries of institutions, they had little effect on their modes of operation. When they start competing with or even replace 'traditional' missions and activities, they create tensions inside institutions and force adjustments that can deeply affect them. What were these new demands? How were they formulated and channelled to universities?

Some of these new demands came from students. New types of students entered universities or became a significant part of the student population. Mature student, part-time students, working students, students attending short programmes may currently make up a majority of 'learners' in universities and colleges. To know them, to understand their needs and motivations, to provide them with the kind of education they expect, in terms of content and modes of delivery, has become crucial for the survival of institutions. Either they pay for their education and training or they attract public money in countries relying on student-related funding schemes. They have a choice and therefore bring competition to bear on institutions. They act as clients on various markets or on various segments of an education market. In order to attract them and to keep them, universities may resort to marketing techniques developed by business. Mission statements are turned into business plans.

New demands also come from industry. Firms want flexible and adaptable knowledge workers. Researchers and research-trained workers are essential to rapidly evolving industrial sectors where a sizeable part of the research and development activities that lead to innovations and commercial successes. They also need new knowledge and are ready to buy it from university laboratories that produce relevant concepts and techniques.

In a similar way, new demands may originate in various sectors of society when groups of interest express needs that can be met by production and application of new knowledge. Once recognised, such groups become stakeholders in higher education and start competing with others for a share of

the attention of institutions. They also may offer financial resources to get satisfaction of their demands, thus creating other markets. Local authorities, professions, even government become purchasers of specific services that universities offer in competition with others: local development through creation of employment, building of collective infrastructure, advising, consultation, and so on.

In a few institutions, a vast amount of energy is devoted to identifying existing needs that are not covered and developing services or 'products' likely to meet such needs or to match what is offered by competitors. They are 'Entrepreneurial universities' (Clark 1998). The majority of institutions, which takes a more cautious approach, cannot but feel pressures mounting around them. At the periphery, they recognise that they are on some markets and that they deal with clients, but the core of their activity is hardly affected. Differences in national traditions, in policies and in legal or institutional settings among higher education systems of developed countries make it likely that the strength of external pressures on universities and the type of response they devise will vary widely. Analysing these variations and comparing national or institutional evolutions is a fascinating task for researchers on higher education.

The Consortium of Higher Education Research (CHER) held its annual conference in September 2001 in Dijon (France) on the following theme: "Higher Education and its clients: Institutional responses to changes in demand and in environment".

This issue of Higher Education presents a selection of articles originating in papers presented at the conference. They offer detailed account of some of the changes and responses observed in a few countries as well as comparative studies conducted in a number of countries of the developed world. A first concern is the study of the changes in the student population and of the extent to which universities responded to them. A second has to do with the research function of universities as places where knowledge is produced and disseminated.

New students, changing expectations towards learning and teaching

Hans Schütze and Maria Slowey study 'non-traditional students', i.e. groups of students who "for a complex range of social, economic and cultural reasons were traditionally excluded from, or under-represented in, higher education". To what extent are they different from 'traditional' students? A comparison of their situation across ten countries allows to identify factors that influence their participation and to realise how traditional structures and concepts of learning poorly address their needs.

Alan Woodley and Jane Wilson concentrates on 'mature students', a heterogeneous category that is becoming a majority in some institutions in the UK. He distinguishes several groups with different needs and trajectories. For those who enter or re-enter higher education after a significant working experience, he observes how little flexibility universities have introduced in their teaching provision to cater for their specific needs.

Brenda Little deals with another group of students, full time undergraduates working during term time in British universities. A consequence of changes in the student support system, student work, probably damaging to academic performance, provides a valuable learning experience which is increasingly being recognised and supported by institutions. Karen Jensen and Per Olaf Aamodt address the issue of student motivations. Faced with the diminishing attraction of nursing or social work studies, fields obviously useful to society but that do not have a long-standing university tradition, Norwegian institutions discuss their admission procedures and their entry requirements to take into account students' moral and professional motivations.

As the widening access to higher education enables new groups of students to enter university, the issue of standards cannot be avoided. Jake Murdoch draws from a large European survey (extended to Japan) on students careers to raise questions on institutional selectivity: Have prestigious

universities opened their doors to new students in the same way as others or have they remained selective? Does competition for students favour elite institutions?

He concludes that student motivations and behaviour in choosing their university as well as admission policies of institutions are highly dependent on the national context and vary between subjects and types of institutions.

In a study of the attitude of Norwegian universities towards continuing education, Ellen Brandt identifies different strategies to enter this competitive and fast growing market. Although market demands may contribute to create innovative courses and to introduce new perspectives that will benefit 'traditional' education, universities chose not to respond to all market demands and to base their offer of continuing education on research-oriented teaching and learning.

Reflecting on the much-publicised concept of lifelong learning, Ben Jongbloed assesses its implications for higher education providers. It requires them to move as much as they can to a student-centered provision of education and training. Mass individualisation will have far-reaching consequences for the curriculum, the concept of research, the interaction with students, and the relationships with other institutions in the education system. Boundaries between different types of providers, sectors (higher education, vocational education, continuing education) and disciplines will become irrelevant as students will cross them at different points of their life. This is in line with the new mode of knowledge production which requires a trans-disciplinary approach, characterised by interaction between users, producers and brokers of knowledge (Gibbons et al. 1994)

In a broader perspective, Margarita Jeliakova and Don Westerheijden look at the evolution of the concept and methods of quality assurance in western European universities. After a few decades of unprecedented growth in student enrolment, concern with quality of provision appeared and institutions were subjected to an evaluation of their teaching programmes. They identify several stages in the development of quality assurance with notable shifts in aims and purposes. Starting with a need for public accountability, quality assurance ends up as a requirement of the clients of institutions that increasingly diversify their education supply under the pressure of competition.

University research in the knowledge society

Donald Fisher and Janet Atkinson-Grosjean refer to the Canadian universities industry liaison offices (ILOs) as the universities' brokers in the knowledge market. They describe how these offices were institutionalised when universities started commercialising their research. Some universities operate with an 'internal' model where the ILO is fully integrated into the university's structure. Other universities operate with an 'external' model where the ILO is set up outside the university either as a non-profit or a for-profit corporation. Conflict over ownership and disclosure is most likely in universities that adopt the 'internal' model and least likely in those who adopt the 'external' model. The gap between university culture and commercial culture is narrowing with the new generations of researchers especially in biological and health sciences.

Kay Harman presents an evaluation of the Co-operative Research Centres (CRCs), a feature of Australian universities that has a strong impact on research training, particularly in developing in students more favourable attitudes to university-industry collaboration in R&D and more favourable orientations towards careers in industry. Most doctoral students linked to CRCs are full-time and supported by industry-based scholarships. She compares doctoral students working in CRCs or funded by them with other research students. A surveys shows that they fare better on a number of indicators and that their attitude towards working in industry or applied research organisations is significantly more positive.

For Jürgen Enders, doctoral training nowadays stands at the heart of the traditional idea of the university as an institution not only combining but cross-fertilising education and science, teaching and research, in the Humboltian tradition. In many countries, efforts are made to organise more

systematically the training of researchers and to increase its relevance to the world outside higher education. However, a research conducted in German universities challenges the view that decisions made by governments, intermediate bodies and universities to reorganise and streamline doctoral training will bring the degree of change that is being thought of among other things to broaden and strengthen the employability of doctoral candidates

In a reflection on the concept of knowledge and its changing status in our society, Ivar Bleiklie and Haldor Byrkjeflot observe that higher education has come under pressure to expand the kinds and types of knowledge it provides and to diversify the criteria by which it is judged. This is the result of a struggle to define the true nature of knowledge among different actors, states and politicians, institutional leaders and students, researchers and intellectuals, consultants and business leaders. Until recently, public attention has focused on the formal education system, because it is so amenable to state steering, and the "other educational system" - adult education, further education, life-long learning, etc. - has received less attention. However, with the transition to a more utility-oriented knowledge concept, and with the various efforts to create a more knowledge-intensive private business sector, the focus is now moving towards this alternative system.

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