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World class universities and the public interest

Ellen Hazelkorn - 03 March 2014

The distribution of research funding and the new HE funding model have widened the privilege gap, not just affecting institutions and their students but undermining the cities and regions in which they reside

The acceleration of globalisation and the intensity of the economic crisis have focused attention on strategies for growing knowledge-intensive industries and investment in knowledge-based and intellectual assets. In this context, the quality, performance and status of higher education have become signals of global competitiveness and a beacon for mobile capital and talent. Universities are measured according to indicators in which comparative and competitive advantages come into play. This helps explain why global rankings have assumed such significance in recent years. Indeed, their significance today is less about informing student choice than the geo-political positioning of nations.

As the reputation arms-race heats up, it is becoming increasingly evident that no government will be able to afford all the higher education that its citizens demand or society requires. Usher argues that the maximum point of public investment in higher education was reached by 2009.¹ The global financial crisis is only phase one of the problem; long-term, there are significant demographic and sustainability issues at play. Recent years have seen some nations able to invest very heavily while others have been reducing or re-directing resources. As we seek to compete in this resource-intensive race a number of important questions confront us: what are the wider implications for our model of mass publicly-funded higher education? Should resources be directed to a few universities to help them perform best against rankings or should national policy ensure resources meet the needs of the wider society? What are trade-offs between public policy and private good, and between institutional ambition and system coherence? Three points should be considered in answering these questions:

1. Redistribute research funding to lessen the privilege gap between students, institutions, cities and regions

“Being” or “becoming” world class now drives many national strategies. The concept of “world-class” is based on an extrapolation of characteristics of the top 100 universities. It encourages an interpretation that by concentrating resources in a few elite universities and a few key disciplines, universities can climb higher in global rankings and their host nation can gain perceived benefits for citizens. The story is not so simple.

For a start, the (social) cost exceeds most national budgets. Crude estimates put the annual budget per world-class university at approx. \$2bn. Even for wealthy countries, this strategy would require diverting limited resources to few institutions effectively robbing from the poor to pay the rich – dubbed the “Sheriff of Nottingham” model.² Moreover, the pervasiveness of focusing on the top 100 – with indicators which disproportionately emphasise research – undermines the wider role and responsibilities of higher education. Rankings encourage prestige-seeking by being more selective: focusing on high-achievers

who bring in revenue and aid performance indicators; limiting class/cohort size; shifting from needs-based to merit scholarships. As this happens, there is growing evidence of increasing stratification within the system; the issue is not simply about widening participation but “who gets what”.

For a while, commentators have been saying that concentrating resources and research activity in a few places is at best counter-productive and at worst could undermine national economic capacity.³ Thus, it is not obvious that the elite model of knowledge creation can create sufficient exploitable patentable knowledge useful for society. Recent evidence also shows how the distribution of research funding and the new HE funding model have widened the privilege gap, not just affecting institutions and their students but undermining the cities and regions in which they reside.⁴

Ironically, at a time when higher education is in greatest demand and governments struggle to fund all societal needs, there is an increasing focus on the resource-intensive “world-class university”. This is not an argument against competing or participating in world science. However, we seem, perhaps unwittingly, to be acclaiming a model of university disconnected from the nation-state or committed to its region as it concentrates on diversifying and privatizing its funding base, recruiting talent internationally and engaging globally.

2. Encourage collaboration between institutions to establish a world-class system

As the distribution of economic activity has gone global, city-regions now compete on a global terrain. Competitive advantage is built through developing clusters of activity which are able to build capacity beyond individual capability. Innovation derives from interdisciplinary, collaborative solutions and interactions between networks of different actors. This requires a greater diversity of educational and research opportunities and perspectives – and people to work in jobs we don’t yet know about.⁵ This also necessitates people who can think outside-the-box, and whose contribution to creating, applying and sharing knowledge ill-fits the type of metrics promulgated by global rankings. It also challenges the inflated importance of the single world-class or flagship-university as the “entrepreneurial” engine of a national or regional economy.

In this context, higher education must rethink its own role and responsibilities. It should commit to making a multifaceted contribution to society and the economy, by engaging in learning beyond the campus walls, discovery which is useful beyond the academic community, and service that directly benefits the public. This involves individual institutions achieving some form of unique leadership based upon their particular mission and expertise. The concept of the “Civic University” describes mutually beneficial engagement that promotes and embeds partnerships with the community, industry and government, in the co-production of knowledge, because complex problems require collaborative solutions.

Government should look to establish collaborative clusters of institutions working together to make the system-as-a-whole world-class. This approach recognises the contribution and collective benefits of diverse approaches to teaching and learning, discovery and research, and innovation and engagement – involving all disciplines across the entire innovation spectrum. Rather than looking at the tertiary system “simply as a mechanism for churning out a handful of elites and perpetuating social inequality...”,⁶ what matters is how governments prioritise skilled labour force, equity, regional growth, better citizens, future Einsteins and global competitiveness, and translate them into policy. After all, a world class system is not

simply the aggregate of world-class universities.

3. Don't let the global reputation race be the driving purpose

During 1980s, Ronald Reagan, then US President, promulgated a strategy for economic growth based on cutting the top tax bracket from 70% to 50% and then to 28%. “Trickle down” economics or “Reaganomics” argued that putting more money in the hands of the elite would create more jobs and lessen inequality. International evidence, however, shows the results have been the opposite of the one predicted. Is there a lesson for us today?

Higher education is part of wider geo-political struggle in which nations struggle for a greater share of the global market. Many of the reforms being pursued are necessary and inevitable – and arguably late in coming. However, at a time of growing demand by society: Is higher education being transformed into a private self-serving entity less engaged or committed to its nation/region as it pursues its world-class position? Has the public's interest become confused with private interest?

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This is a contribution to Policy Network's work on [Reclaiming the supply-side agenda](#).