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Research Paper Education

Higher Education in 21st Century: Global trends

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ABSTRACT

There is widespread recognition that skills and human capital have become the backbone of economic prosperity and social well-being in the 21st century. In contemporary knowledge intensive economies and societies, individual and societal progress is increasingly driven by technological advances. Prosperity requires nations to retain their competitive edge by developing and sustaining a skilled workforce, maintaining a globally competitive research base, and improving the dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society at large.

In this context, higher education represents a critical factor in innovation and human capital development and plays a central role in the success and sustainability of the knowledge economy (Dill and Van Vught, 2010). As recent as 40 to 50 years ago, higher education essentially referred to the traditional research universities. This picture is entirely different today. Several trends have contributed to reshaping the higher education. Today HEIs are more diversified and are closer to a patchwork model attended by larger segments of the population. Thus, higher education today is characterised by massive expansion and wider participation; the emergence of new players; more diverse profiles of HEIs, programmes and their students; broader adoption and more integrated use of communications and educational technologies; greater internationalisation, competition and signalling mechanisms; growing pressures on costs and new forms of financing; as well as new modes and roles of governance, including increasing emphasis on performance, quality and accountability. Hence, higher education has become increasingly important on national agendas and has undergone profound mutations and reforms worldwide over the past decades.

KEYWORDS :

Introduction:

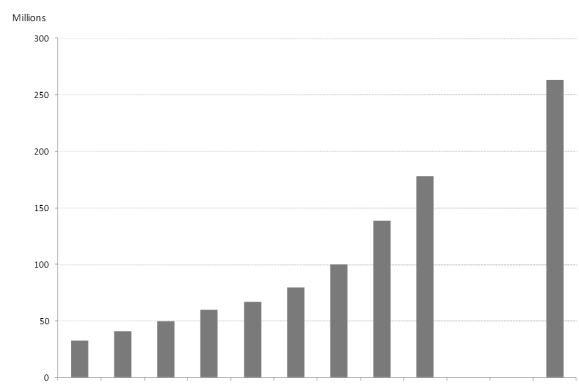
There is widespread recognition that skills and human capital have become the backbone of economic prosperity and social well-being in the 21st century. In contemporary knowledge intensive economies and societies, individual and societal progress is increasingly driven by technological advances. Prosperity requires nations to retain their competitive edge by developing and sustaining a skilled workforce, maintaining a globally competitive research base, and improving the dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society at large.

In this context, higher education represents a critical factor in innovation and human capital development and plays a central role in the success and sustainability of the knowledge economy (Dill and Van Vught, 2010). Hence, higher education has become increasingly important on national agendas and has undergone profound mutations and reforms worldwide over the past decades. The global trends that have shaped the development of higher education over the past half century are as following:

Expansion of higher education systems

There is dramatic expansion of higher education worldwide, as depicted in Figure 1, in 1970, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimated that there were roughly 32.5 million students enrolled in higher education worldwide. In the year 2000, this estimation increased to nearly 100 million and in 2010 to 178 million. This translates into 4.3% average annual growth in tertiary enrolment, a very rapid growth when compared to the 1.6% average annual growth in the world population over the same period (UNDP, 2012). Figure 1 also reveals an accelerating expansion starting in the mid-1990s, with a 5.9% average annual growth of higher education enrolments in the first decade of the 21st century. The number of higher education students is forecast to further expand to reach 263 million by 2025 (Davis, 2003 and Daniel, 2009).

Figure 1 Trends in higher education enrolments worldwide, 1970-2025



Source: **UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre for 1970-2010 and Daniel (2009) for 2025 forecast**.

Growth has prevailed on all continents and constitutes a defining feature of global trends of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Guri-Rosenblit et al., 2007). There are many underlying factors. First and foremost the public demand for higher education has soared, fuelled by growing upper-secondary completion rates. Additional factors include social mobility expectations, growing female participation, as well as democratisation and urbanisation processes and independence movements in the developing world. The shift towards post industrial economies has also affirmed that an educated workforce is essential for economic development and has heightened the demand for white-collar workers in the public sector and service industries. Finally, the accelerated pace of technological change has further stimulated access to and participation in higher education (Gibbons, 1998).

Emergence of new players

As a corollary to the massification of access and participation over the past half century, higher education systems have experienced an increase in higher education providers, with a burgeoning of new Higher education Institutions (HEIs) established across the globe to respond to growing demand. As a matter of fact, the majority of HEIs

operating today were established in the past century To illustrate the magnitude of change, the Indian higher education system consisted of 27 universities and 695 colleges at the time of independence in 1949 (Agarwal, 2009). By 2006, the number of HEIs had sky-rocketed to 361 universities and thousands of colleges. This trend is unlikely to abate with the further growth in total enrolments projected for the next 15 years.

More diverse profiles of institutions, programmes and students

A related trend is the growing diversity of higher education student bodies, HEIs and their educational offerings. This diversification is generally assumed to offer major advantages to the various stakeholders in higher education systems, like better addressing students' needs, enabling higher levels of higher education attainment, improving social mobility, better serving the needs of the labour market, increasing political legitimisation and more effective higher education systems (Van Vught, 2008).

Continuing advancement and rapid integration of new technology

Communication and education delivery technologies are continuing to advance at accelerating rates. These advancements have had and will continue to have significant impact on the organisation and provision of higher education both within countries and worldwide (Johnson et al., 2012). This presents challenges for higher education in all countries including keeping pace with rapid advances in communications and social networking technologies; accommodating the increased costs of technology into existing mechanisms for financing higher education; and taking full advantage of the educational opportunities these technologies provide to expand student access and improve their success in higher education.

Greater internationalisation

The internationalisation of higher education also features among the sector's key transformations in the past 25 years, especially in the European context. International activities and exchanges have long been bound to research – despite signs of student and academic mobility in medieval European universities – while teaching and learning remained essentially nationally-based. But internationalisation has widened in scope over the past three decades, and is now an essential dimension of national and institutional strategy and policy (OECD, 2008).

Increasing pressures on costs and new modes of financing

Another prominent trend of higher education over the past few decades relates to the growing pressure of its cost, and the adoption of new modes of financing in many countries. The first phenomenon of rising costs is a direct consequence of the expansion of higher education systems and wider participation, which have increased the financial burden of higher education as most countries have tried to expand their systems while limiting the adverse impact on unit costs and expenditure to maintain quality. Indeed higher education provision offers limited scope for economies of scale. At the aggregate level, for the 25 OECD countries with trend data, the cost of higher education has risen from 1.3 to 1.5% of GDP between 1995 and 2009. Moreover, unit costs have also increased since 2000 by 9% on average across the organization for economic cooperation and development..

Growing emphasis on market forces: competition and signalling mechanisms

Competition and signalling mechanisms have also become more prominent in the higher education sphere over time, as a corollary to the growth in educational offerings, private provision, rising costs, fiscal pressure and the internationalisation of higher education. These mechanisms were triggered by a number of different factors.

New modes of governance stressing performance, quality and accountability

In parallel with the above trends, the governance and steering of higher education has also evolved in the last two decades, spurred on by the growing number of HEIs, the diversification of their missions, student bodies and roles, and the rise of New Public Management principles as well as private providers (Dobbins et al., 2011). Overall, the growing complexity of higher education systems has made central oversight increasingly inadequate, and most countries in which it was prevalent have engaged in reforms to revisit higher education steering mechanisms (Dobbins et al., 2011).

Concerns for drop-out and its implications for equity and efficiency

In the context of massive expansion of higher education systems and wider participation, there are persistent concerns related to the quality and relevance of students' preparation for higher education. These concerns stem from the greater heterogeneity of students than in the past, with respect to their abilities or expectations, and the multiplication of new HEIs – including some rogue providers – as discussed above. Of particular concern to policy makers is the magnitude of non completion, often perceived as a waste of financial and human resources. Indeed, in spite of the adoption and development of sophisticated quality assurance systems in most OECD countries over the past two decades, failure and inefficiencies in the learning process have not been eradicated (OECD, 2008).

Conclusion:

As recent as 40 to 50 years ago, higher education essentially referred to the traditional research universities. This picture is entirely different today. Several trends have contributed to reshaping the higher education. Today HEIs are more diversified and are closer to a patchwork model attended by larger segments of the population. Thus, higher education today is characterised by massive expansion and wider participation; the emergence of new players; more diverse profiles of HEIs, programmes and their students; broader adoption and more integrated use of communications and educational technologies; greater internationalisation, competition and signalling mechanisms; growing pressures on costs and new forms of financing; as well as new modes and roles of governance, including increasing emphasis on performance, quality and accountability.

Hence, higher education has become increasingly important on national agendas and has undergone profound mutations and reforms worldwide over the past decades.

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