HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE BEYOND 2010: RESOLVING CONFLICTING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS

PROJECT SUMMARY

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are being subjected to a variety of pressures that seek, primarily, to enhance higher education's contribution to the successful creation of so-called 'knowledge societies', together with, and receiving only slightly less emphasis, the achievement of greater equity and social justice. This Forward Look will examine the relevant higher education research literature in terms of its underlying conceptual approaches and empirical findings across a number of selected sub-themes in order to derive a future research agenda that will address scientific questions of long term strategic concern to the future of higher education.

THE 'FORWARD LOOK'

1)   Rationale

Contexts

All European countries are witnessing rapid changes to, and expansion of, their higher education systems and institutions. These changes have been accompanied by policy interventions at institutional, national and international levels which have challenged traditional academic cultures and relationships while bringing new social dynamics to higher education systems and institutions. These developments have produced a substantial research literature, much of it policy driven and relatively narrowly focused. The aim of this Forward Look is to examine this literature in terms of its underlying conceptual approaches and empirical findings across a number of selected sub-themes in order to derive a future research agenda that will address scientific questions of long term strategic concern to the future of higher education.

Higher education institutions have been subjected to a variety of pressures that have sought, primarily, to enhance higher education's contribution to the successful creation of so-called 'knowledge economies', together with, and receiving only slightly less emphasis, the achievement of greater equity and social justice. These pressures have led to a differentiation between 'elite' and 'mass' functions, to changing and differentiated notions of 'graduateness' and 'expertise', to changing relationships between research and teaching functions, to a shifting balance between pre-career and 'lifelong' learning, and to changing relationships between higher education institutions and the communities they serve - locally, nationally and internationally. Above all, these pressures have challenged traditional structures and cultures of governance and steering of higher education systems and institutions.

Research on higher education began to receive greater scientific attention in European countries in the 1970s, largely as a consequence of the growing public awareness of the inter-relationships between education and economic growth, social mobility, student unrest and subsequent reform efforts in higher education. From the late 1980s onwards, research on higher education attracted interest in the wake of debates about the knowledge society, new modes of steering and management and increasing internationalisation. In the current framework of the Bologna and Lisbon processes, research on higher education is again receiving growing attention. Reshaping higher education systems has become a topical question across Europe and this, in turn, is raising issues and research questions concerning, not least, its role, functions and outcomes. Higher education is expected to actively contribute to the reinforcement of national and regional competitiveness within the global knowledge economy, while its educational missions are being required to foster both excellence and democracy. In other words, increasing expectations and even contradictory demands are being made of higher education. An examination of the resulting tensions lies at the heart of this Forward Look.

2) State of the art

A theme-based type of research

Much higher education research has been policy driven in character, drawing from different disciplines. In addition, the borderline has been fuzzy between researchers and other experts in the field, sometimes leading to contributions that do not follow conventional types of scholarly and research-based knowledge. Theories in higher education research could benefit from the more general frameworks of, for example, human capital theories, theories of power, inequality and social exclusion, theories of teaching, learning and personality development, theories of organisations, new public management etc. Theme-specific thrusts within the higher education research community can also be identified, e.g. "mass higher education", "coordination of higher education systems", "structural dynamics of higher education systems", "academic drift", "highly educated society". The bringing together of the somewhat fragmented research communities that contribute to the field will be one of the main challenges of the dialogues, diagnostics and propositions that will form the proposed Forward Look. The challenge is to develop a scientific agenda for future higher education research which can be set alongside the policy agenda.

Themes to be examined by the Forward Look

The higher education research literature will be explored by the Forward Look through the examination of five related themes:

- Higher education and the needs of the knowledge society
- Higher education and the achievement of equity and social justice
- Higher education and its communities: interconnections and interdependencies
- Steering and governance of higher education
- Differentiation and diversity of institutional forms and professional roles.

Below are summarised some of the main issues to be considered within the five themes.

Theme 1: Higher education and the needs of the knowledge society

The *economic* expectations placed on higher education reflect both the knowledge and skills needs of workers in modern knowledge-based economies and the demands for relevance in research and knowledge creation to the future successful development of these economies (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1997, Enders and Fulton, 2002, Castells, 1996). The former involve notions of 'flexible professionalism' defined in various ways together with some redrawing of boundaries between higher education and employment sectors in the formation and continuing development of these professionals (Brown and Scase, 1994, Teichler, 1998). The latter similarly involve changing boundaries and relationships involved in knowledge creation, sometimes characterised as a move from Mode 1 to Mode 2 science (Gibbons et al, 1994). Key questions within this theme will be the adequacy of human capital theory in explaining changing relationships between higher education and work, the balance between initial formation and continuing professional development in knowledge-based economies, and the division of labour between higher education institutions and employers in meeting education and training needs. It will also question the role of higher education institutions in innovation policies, in technology transfer and in the process of growth (Vandenbussche, Aghion and Meghir 2004).

Theme 2: Higher education and the achievement of equity and social justice

The *social* expectations placed on higher education reflect the centrality of educational credentials to opportunity and mobility structures in modern societies and the demonstrable unequal access to such structures among, for example, different social classes, ethnic groups and geographical regions (Shavit, Y. & Blossfeld, 1993; Tight, 2003; Chauvel, 2005). Within 'mass' systems of higher education, differential social access to higher education and to its different forms and statuses becomes increasingly important to larger processes of social reproduction and transformation (Archer et al, 2002; Naidoo, R, 2000, Reay et al, 2005). Key questions here concern the relationship between higher education's roles in social reproduction and its roles in extending opportunities for social mobility and the achievement of greater social justice.

Theme 3: Higher education and its communities: interconnections and interdependencies

The changing expectations placed on higher education systems and institutions have resulted in new relationships within and between higher education institutions and in new relationships between them and the external communities which they serve. These have local, regional, national and international elements to them (e.g. Huisman et al., 2001, Castells, 1996, Clark, 1998, Dill and Sporn, 2005). Interconnections and interdependencies concern *external functions* (for example, the economic and social functions indicated above) and *internal functions* (for example, between teaching, research and knowledge transfer). They concern *people* (for example, new types of academic and administrative roles) and they concern *institutions (*different types of higher education institution, new intermediary bodies, client and partner institutions in public and private spheres). Key questions will concern whether new function can be performed without detriment to the old and what are the change mechanisms within higher education institutions and systems needed to bring about effective realignments between higher education and its various communities.

Theme 4: Steering and governance of higher education

The changes required in higher education as a result of these new social and economic expectations have produced new forms of governance, funding and evaluation of higher education systems and institutions (Amaral et al, 2002, Braun and Merrien, 1999, Gornitzka, 1999, Brennan and Shah, 2000). Within these changes can be detected altered relationships between higher education and the state (Kogan et al 2000, Musselin 2004) and the emergence of new market relationships between higher education and other social sectors. In different combinations in different places, this has involved: increasing institutional autonomy along with increased accountability; indicator-based incentive steering; a strengthening of managerial power within institutions; systematic evaluation activities serving both greater control and reflexivity; contract management; strengthening of stakeholder power; and privatisation. Changed funding arrangements (for example, as between basic and incentive funding and between public and private sources of funding) have also occurred as have changes to staffing policies in order to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency (Enders, 2001, Musselin 2005). Key questions for this theme are to do with the implications of different forms of decision-making, accountability and funding for higher education's ability to perform existing and new functions

Theme 5: Differentiation and diversity of institutional forms and professional roles

Arising from these changes in expectations and processes has been an increase in diversity and differentiation across higher education. This has evolved differently in different countries although some authors have detected aspects of convergence, at least in particular elements. The literature points to differentiation of institutional forms, of educational programmes and of staff roles (Meek et al. 1996; Jongbloed et al, 1999). Differentiation has been both *vertical,* in increasing status and prestige differences associated with different forms, and *horizontal*, involving greater division of labour between, for example, teaching and research, vocational and academic education. The understanding, legitimacy (and degree of consensus) accorded both vertical and horizontal differentiation differs substantially between and within countries. Differentiation of higher educational provision is accompanied by, and related to, a growing differentiation of student and graduate populations. The questions raised within theme five relate to the preceding themes and to whether further differentiation within national systems will be accompanied by greater convergence between systems if higher education is to respond effectively to changing social and economic climates in European countries.

3) Organisation

Workshops on each of these themes will be organised during the autumn of 2006 followed by an interim conference early in 2007 and a final conference in the summer of 2007. At each of the workshops, a 'state of the art' review of research on the relevant theme will be presented for critique by a small group of scholars in the field. The theme papers will then be revised and synthesised for presentation to broader groups of scholars and policy makers at conferences during 2007.

Organising Committee

Professor John Brennan, United Kingdom (Chair)
Professor Luca Codignola, Italy
Professor Jürgen Enders, the Netherlands
Dr Christine Musselin, France
Professor Manfred Prenzel, Germany
Professor Ulrich Teichler, Germany
Professor Jussi Välimaa, Finland

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