

## Globalization and Higher Education

The recently published White Paper on universities in England by the Department for Education and Skills (The Future of Higher Education) is striking in the vocabulary that it draws upon to explain government plans for higher education. The document is full of references to the world is changing faster, the need to compete on the world stage, or to the national requirement for world-class universities and for world-class researchers. The rationale for reform lies in the necessity to maintain and to enhance national comparative advantage in an increasingly economically competitive world. Universities are the key. Their research (especially) and teaching performances are the basis for success (or otherwise) in the knowledge-based economies that mark the contemporary era.

We might describe this as the language of globalization. The UK government is not alone in using it; administrations everywhere do. In Australia the consultative documents from the federal government on reforming the universities (Crossroads) also reveal official anxiety about global competitiveness and the need for more world-class institutions in Australian higher education. It would be instructive (if someone has the time) to go back to similar government statements on the universities in earlier decades. Was the 1960s Robbins Report on British universities as exercised about international competition as the government today is? When did the language start to change, and what triggered it? And what do we mean by globalization anyway, and what are its implications for higher education?

Of course, the term globalization appears everywhere. There hardly passes a day without some reference to it, either in the newspapers or in academic books and journals. Yet it is invoked to explain a myriad of phenomena, some with only loose connections to each other. While some writers use globalization to explain what is happening to the modern world (such as alleged cultural similarity between nations or greater global economic connectedness), others regard globalization itself as the process that needs explaining (by, say, theories of capitalism, or models of the constant creation of new forms of technology). You can find observers who do not believe globalization actually exists — regarding it is an ideology, or narrative, which is used by scheming politicians to justify an array of policies at odds with electoral commitments. Many see globalization as a purely economic phenomenon — as worldwide economic integration, powered by neoliberal politics, electronics, instantaneous communications, and the multinational corporations — while others see it more as a form of Western cultural imperialism, or as having a political dimension, as expressed in alliances for collective security, such as NATO.

We might best regard globalization as consisting of flows — of capital (financial and physical), people, information, and culture, and so on —

which move along various global highways , and create new forms of inequality of access between people and their locations. As such it stimulates a set of critical questions, particularly focused on national or territorial states. Are these losing the influence to control events in their own countries in the face of the power of financial investors and large international companies, and are they thus forced to adopt policies — on taxation and labour market de-regulation, for example — that their domestic supporters wished that they did not, but which they deem necessary to secure the conditions for economic prosperity and the wellbeing of their citizens?

The answers are by no means clear-cut. The evidence suggests that governments in a number of countries are able to implement social measures without too much, if any, impact on foreign inward investment, for example, that large global companies are not able to move operations around the world that easily, particularly if they have high levels of research and development, and that nation states, including through forms of global, national and supranational (the EU, for example) rulemaking, are both involved in encouraging modes of globalization and in its regulation. But what has this to do with universities?

Universities historically are international in their academic and intellectual orientations. Science and rationality tend to chafe at national or territorial limitations on knowledge and the claims for its validity. Epistemology is universalistic in our traditions, or as close to it as possible. The wandering scholar may be less fancy free and footloose than in medieval times, but inter-country academic exchange and mobility are critical aspects of university enquiry and teaching. On the other hand, universities are instruments of states too, regulated by them (including which institutions are to be allowed the title of university ) and with governments providing much of their funding. And, although research is becoming increasingly globally and socially networked and distributed, as Michael Gibbons has observed, teaching and community relations are functions of universities that are still largely rooted within national boundaries (despite the Internet and the commercial growth of global higher education).

National governments still exert considerable regulatory authority over university systems, including over the fees that can be charged to full-time undergraduate students. Through funding and other policies the state can seek, for example, wider social access and the promotion of particular areas of research. Moreover, nation states remain anxious to use their deep financial pockets and other levers to harness universities, especially their scientific research, to best comparative economic advantage. Universities still have a strong sense of place (campus, region) and university systems display marked national characteristics. Career paths largely favour the nationals of the country, either formally or through more subtle means. At regional level, EU or supranational public authority and regulation for higher education has not yet emerged (as opposed to inter-governmental declarations of intent).

In some developing countries, too, states are anxious that they retain the ability to use universities as key instruments to build up national capacities. In South Africa, where national reconstruction is critical to its long-term future, there is governmental suspicion that the increased globalization and commercialization of university activities in the more developed world will result in denuded or undernourished university sectors elsewhere. Partnerships by local institutions with foreign universities are regarded in many cases as simply profitable marriages of convenience, enabling the external partner to enter the South African market with little or no contribution to the development of the teaching and research capacity of the local partner. On the other hand, however, if globalization is construed as the diffusion of innovation, as Michael Gibbons has argued, then too strong a national policy of protectionism and regulation may lead to a fortress approach that may hinder the pedagogic and other major changes that may be essential for the successful development of an efficient and high value domestic university system.

These tensions between the state and global forces, and between governments and universities, can be found at a number of levels. One is in different interpretations of international agreements by governments. To take one example, for some countries the European Bologna process to seek greater harmonization between members' university systems is a means for making European universities more competitive in the face of American, Australian and Asian challenges for international fee-paying students and commercial research opportunities. For others, however, Bologna is regarded as a form of protection from globalization for public service higher education in Europe, with its domestic monopolies, government grants and public good ethic, and its commitment to social objectives such as equity, national cultures, emancipation, and access. It reminds us that even in the age of globalization, varieties of national economy and comparative institutional advantage persist, and these are reflected in different policy stances by governments to global higher education. However, whatever the stances of governments, many individual universities, of course, lack the resources or capabilities to become global commercial players.

Despite persisting national educational policy variety, however, there is evidence that globalization tends to increase international and supranational convergence on higher education policies by governments, and also on forms of regulation. The forces affecting higher education around the world are often strikingly similar — expanding enrolments, less public funding (per student), lifetime learning, and more private investment — and may be regarded as constituting global phenomena. Yet, in comparison with global forms of business regulation, there is little transnational standardization or regulation (including quality assurance) that is often regarded as a key factor in promoting globalization in other sectors.

An important question that needs to be answered is whether increases or decreases in regulation flow from the growth of globalization. Provisionally,

it would appear that global competition reduces or severely modifies market regulation (that is, it opens up markets to wider competitive forces), but, at the same time, it may also lead to new regulatory regimes — for customer protection, for example. (This tends to happen with the privatization of key utilities, too). In higher education particularly, can we detect stronger regulatory or deregulatory impulses that can be traced to increased worldwide connectedness, especially with the development of higher education as a tradable and commercial activity?

Globalization influences can also operate on national regulatory bodies. In the UK, the English Funding Council has helped to finance an E-University to assist universities to compete in the international online commercial market, but subject to clear quality controls. National quality assurance bodies for higher education have also been established in a number of countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK, at least in part to protect reputation and marketability for domestic universities in overseas countries. Yet it is doubtful that a single global or, say, European quality assurance and accreditation body for universities will be established in the near future. Nor is it likely that a harmonized set of standards will be promulgated and applied. This is not simply because the autonomous traditions of universities make such approaches problematic, but because international and global regulatory regimes in areas other than education often rely on the principle of mutual recognition rather than on harmonization to generate processes of convergence on standards.

If national regulatory diversity continues to prevail in global contexts for universities, it is possible that it will reinforce tendencies for the creation of the transnational university, or at least transnational consortia of universities, along the lines of the transnational business corporations found in the global economy. Such universities, operating to maximum benefit in outlets around the world, would take their advantages from their corporate organizational form. This would enable them to internalize the international exploitation of their assets, in the context of locational risk and opportunity as this is generated by differences in national forms of regulation and gaps in international regulatory coordination. Competition between national regulatory systems could ensue (despite international efforts by governments to prevent this), with transnational universities picking and choosing their preferred regulator (or setting up their own). At that point the historic alignment between the nation state, social purposes, and the university would have given way to one based more on global frameworks and corporate or private interest.

Yet, as the recent government policy documents that we outlined in the opening paragraphs indicate, nation states are unlikely to be happy with such a state of affairs and are likely to strongly resist its arrival. They see universities as key instruments in developing the scientific and research necessary for national innovation and competitiveness in the global economy, particularly in the technologies that have high economic value. Tensions between an increasingly transnational university, with strengthening corporate interests, and states with clear and publicly

legitimized social agendas, are likely to increase, with their resolution unclear.

The study of globalization and its implications for universities is under-researched. Particularly there has been little in the way of empirical work on the comparative policy implications of global processes. Does globalization produce a convergence in the policies of national governments towards their universities, or are there significant variations that require explanation? What are the mechanisms by which such processes operate and how can we successfully operationalize these for the purposes of substantive enquiry? What role do inter-governmental and supranational bodies (such as the OECD, or the EU, or UNESCO) play in conducting a similarity of approach by governments in their policies towards higher education (involving the so-called epistemic communities of policymakers and private specialist groups)? Do countries have historic institutional infrastructures and ideologies that, despite the compelling forces of globalization, continue to produce comparative policy variation? And how likely are we to find in the university sector increasingly successful global attempts to harmonize regulatory regimes — and what are the variables carrying most explanatory importance?

Overall, a major question looms. Will globalization make universities even more the instruments of the nation state, as part of the aim by governments to generate comparative economic advantage in an integrated, knowledge-based world economy — or will globalization and the attendant commercialization and corporatization of universities lead them (or at least a sizeable segment) to float away from the social and economic purposes, and grip, of the nation state, to pursue their own corporate, increasingly multinational interests? And what will happen to those universities that remain behind? Will some universities be state-driven and others globally-driven and how will governmental policymakers react to the prospect of such a fracturing? And, relatedly, are states becoming hands-off enablers (retreating, becoming weaker, and more dependent on a range of private and corporate actors) in the face of globalization — as many theories in social and political science would have it — or, conversely, are they likely to become even more directive through the use of increasingly interventionist forms of regulation?

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Ps. An expanded form of some of these arguments can be found in *Globalization and the University* by Roger King, in King, R., Bjarnason, S., Edwards, K., Gibbons, M. and Ryan, Y. (2003, forthcoming), *The University in the Global Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan).