POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Facing Global Challenges: A European University Perspective

Watson Scott Swail

epi EDUCATIONAL Policy Institute

About the Author

DR. WATSON SCOTT SWAIL is the President and Chief Executive Officer of The Educational Policy Institute, a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to policy-based research on educational opportunity for all students. Dr. Swail also serves as CEO of EPI International, a for-profit research institute aligned with the Educational Policy Institute.

Dr. Swail founded EPI in 2002 to meet a growing need for high-level research on educational opportunity issues. Since that time, EPI has conducted dozens of studies on issues from early childhood reading to postsecondary outcomes for students. EPI's clients have included Lumina Foundation for Education, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, the Texas Education Agency, and several state education organizations and local school districts.

Dr. Swail has a very broad understanding of education. He served as a middle school teacher in Canada and the United States for seven years, while also becoming an expert in curriculum design and teacher professional development. He has worked on school reform initiatives and currently assists several school districts around the country with reforms designed to improve student persistence in middle and high school. In 2000, he directed the National Survey of Outreach Programs while working at the College Board, which surveyed over 1,100 programs around the US. He is currently directing the 2010 National Survey of College Outreach Programs.

In addition to his research and writing, Dr. Swail has taught educational policy and research at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, where he received his doctorate in educational policy. He earned his Master's of Science from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and Bachelor's of Education from the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Teachers College Press recently released Swail's "Finding Superman: Debating the Future of Public Education in America" (2012).

———————————

Suggested Citation: Swail, Watson S. (2009, March). "Facing Global Challenges: A European University Perspective." *Policy Perspectives*. Virginia Beach, VA: Educational Policy Institute. Facing Global Challenges: A European University Perspective

Facing Global Challenges: A European University Perspective

Watson Scott Swail, President, Educational Policy Institute

A presentation at the European University Association Annual Convention
March 20, 2009, Prague, Czech Republic

The Bologna process in the European Union has created many questions regarding the role of the university, let alone the entire tertiary/postsecondary system of education. The issues being discussed in the EU are not only pertinent in that arena. Rather, they are living issues being debated around the world: what is the purpose of the niversity? What role does research play? How does the institution interact with community and contribute to the local, regional, and global economy and society?

These are not trivial issues, and the stakes are quite high. In an era of continued globalization and massification of higher education (AKA, the higher education arms race), countries are looking increasingly to the tertiary sector to rescue economic markets from current instabilities, while also ensuring that its citizens are globally competitive. To be fair, the sense around the EU, at least of people at the EUA conference, is that, while there are opportunities within Bologna for institutions to work together, there is more pressure to compete for international students. This can be counterproductive to the questions posed by the EUA and acknowledged above.

Cluster One focuses on three questions:

- Is an institutional strategy on access, retention and quality essential and why should university leaders engage in this debate?

- How can universities deliver high quality programmes to a diversified student population?

- How can universities measure the success of their activities?

First, I think it is important to address the nexus, or connection, between widening participation and institutional/educational excellence. I believe that many educators and professionals see these issues as mutually exclusive. That is, you can't have both open access and institutional excellence, however defined. My sense is that, if true, we have lost before we start because we need both issues to work concurrently, such that they are mutually inclusive, not exclusive.

On one hand, keeping institutions as pure institutions of "higher education" has meaning; we want to create a knowledge base within our intra-

societies to create further knowledge and develop our economy. Higher education has historically served only the top academic and social tiers of society. But if we want to question the role of universities beyond research, then we must think in a broader scope of what society really demands of and from us. Shouldn't higher education reflect the country as a whole? Should it not be a critical and involved component of society? And should it not connect with all people, not just the "chosen" few?

With this, I will address the three questions posed in the cluster.

Is an institutional strategy on access, retention and quality essential and why should university leaders engage in this debate?

The quick answer is yes and no. If an institution only aspires to continue to be internationally ranked and recognized, then no, it is not essential. Top tier institutions can survive in this way, the way many of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Rankings top 100 institutions do. They have the ability, in many cases, to attract 100 percent of the entering classes from outside their borders.

Even if they enroll a much smaller percentage of international students, they still identify and attract the best in the world. They can continue to do this, and will.

However, institutions with this capability reflect a minute percentage of institutions around the world. In the United States, only 20 percent of all universities are considered "selective" in their admissions practices, meaning 4 of 5 institutions operate on a mostly open admission policy.

For arguments sake, let us suggest that less than five percent of the world's institutions are selective enough not to worry about access and equity issues. The argument then follows: is that good enough? From a societal point, is that sufficient, to have a certain, finite number of institutions attending to global prominence, without consideration of state or nation-wide issues? And, if so, who chooses which institutions are given this special status? Are they the Harvards, Stanfords, and Oxfords of the world? Or the polytechnics? In this age of globalization, it seems that all institutions want to serve the world, both for prestige and financial gain (understanding that foreign students typically bring in more money to the state). But we must ask whether this is the best role for institutions to play within our own societies.

In preparation for the discussion, EPI staff looked at the mission statements of the top European institutions of higher education. For example, embedded in the mission statement of the University of Cambridge (World Rank = 4) is that they are to serve

"the widest possible student access to the University." The University of Oxford (World Rank = 10) says that it is to "encourage access to the University by a wider range of applicants and significantly to expand its contribution to vocational and non-vocational Continuing Education," and also to be "more widely accessible, both by broadening recruitment to its degree courses, and by expansion of opportunities for life-long learning…" Other institutions, such as the Technische Universität München (World Rank = 57) do not mention access and participation to any degree. For the power elite— Cambridge and Oxford—we can see through their mission statement that they believe their responsibilities lay beyond the academics to serve society and to embrace, to a degree, broader participation. Conversely, other institutions do not overtly state a desire or mission to serve the broader population. In the end, this may mean little. It is one thing to have a mission statement that details a commitment to broadening tertiary participation; it is entirely another to "live" that mission and ensure that the policies and practices of the institution put the mission into practice. Still, I think it is worthy to acknowledge that upper tier universities often do not see themselves as only serving an upper tier purpose, but contributing to local and societal growth and improvements. In the US, Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut,

is located in an economically-depressed area. Yale has taken on the responsibility of working with the community to improve the conditions for students and community members. This is a great example of a world-class institution working to do more than educated the best and brightest—it also showcases a cognizance that more is required of their advantage in society.

For argument, even if we take the top-tier institutions out of consideration, leaving them to a special, global-service mandate, we are left with 95 percent of institutions that cannot— feasibly— make a similar choice because they are not selective enough, even if they think, via mission creep, they are. Thus, the only viable answer to the original question is "yes:" an institutional strategy on access, retention and quality is essential.

For these institutions, I believe that they must require access and broad participation as a key, if not critical, part of their mission. As mostly non-profit organizations, led by external Boards of Directors, they should abide by their mission and serve the communities and society. If they do not, they risk losing the support of the vast voting public, which is democratic and believe in entities that support the democracy. If taxpayers and citizens do not see the overt value of an institution, it should be hardly surprising that they do not support

it in the long term. If an institution or system is purely seen as elite, in the sense that it is open only for higher classes or castes, the public will only support it to a certain degree and reduce budgeting over time. Public stakeholders want institutions that are meaningful to them, and not just ranked top 100 in the Shanghai or THES rankings.

Institutions that do not serve a broader population also risk becoming isolated from the social and cultural fabric of society. They become distant to the pulse of the nation it was designed to serve, and will lose favor. To a degree, this has happened in the United States. While people understand the importance of a postsecondary, especially a bachelor's, degree, they do not necessarily see universities as always serving in the best interest of society, and occasionally, see them as self serving. This is a dangerous tact and one that is difficult to correct.

The ultimate question is one of philosophy: do the leaders of these institutions--including Rectors, Presidents, Provosts, Chancellors, Chairs, and Directors--believe that their institution has a broader mission to serve society at large and the people of that society? The answer needs to be yes.

How can universities deliver high-quality programmes to a diversified student population?

Again, this is not an antithetical dilemma. Institutions can choose to have high-quality programmes and a diversified population, but it takes crafting and a focus on three particular issues. An institution must first take the philosophical plunge and direct policies toward the success of all students, especially those that may be considered more at-risk (e.g., first generation, low-income, rural, students with disabilities). Until that happens, real change cannot take place. If this philosophy is mandated by the administration, then there must be appropriate support to ensure it happens. Three examples of how this needs to play out are as follows:

Institutions must carefully assess all incoming students, with special focus on those that may be considered more at-risk as to their academic and social abilities. Only when an institution "knows" the student can it plan for his or her success. It students are diagnosed before matriculation, then the institution can make appropriate plans and accommodations for the student. This can be accomplished on an individual basis with a learning plan designed for every single student. While there are detractors who do not believe this is possible or plausible, this is absolutely "doable."

Review and revise curriculum to align with institutional missions and EU-wide standards. The curriculum and resulting pedagogy used in the classroom needs to encompass the learning needs of students with broader learning styles. If students come to an institution with various levels of academic preparation, the curriculum, to a point, needs to respond to that diversity. This, of course, leads to the final example.

Provide safety net programs to ensure that all students can succeed, understanding that many students may need additional academic and social supports. Remembering that broadening participation ultimately means admitting more students of lower-levels of academic preparation, then there must be an acknowledgement that these students will need additional support structures in place to succeed. Simply letting them in the door is not tantamount to student success. Rather, it is an institutional strategy destined for failure. Students need to targeted for support programs, including tutoring and mentoring, to give them the foundation for future success. If the institution is unable or unwilling to provide this level of support, then they shouldn't admit these students in the first place.

Regarding the last point, it is argued that this may be the equivalent of "hand-holding," which I was

gently accused of during my EAU presentation by a Dutch gentleman. Interestingly enough, it is the Dutch that always argue this point with me. If identifying students with additional academic and social needs is hand-holding, I plead guilty. If providing necessary supports to encourage and make success possible is hand-holding, I please guilty. In fact, I argue that doing less is being disingenuous to the student. Promising something that cannot truly be attained does not serve anyone, particularly the taxpayer, well. To the argument that students need to be responsible for their education, I do not argue. But in some cases we have to teach students that level of responsibility if they do not possess it at matriculation. Where students are deficient, we need to prop them up. If not, we need not admit them. In the end, students will become responsible, focused, and educated, if we do our jobs well. However, we need to set up the rules of engagement between institutions and students. That is our responsibility.

How can universities measure the success of their activities?

On the final question, measurement is more easily addressed. Institutions, by nature, are large corporations that require leadership with business acumen. Although supported in large part by public funding, they operate in

a competitive environment with the goal of serving society.

Leadership requires the use of business tools in order to better understand the wellness, efficiency, and efficacy of the organization. Total Quality Management, continuous improvement, Six Sigma—these are business processes that need to be followed by institutions of higher education. Institutions need to collect and analyze data to determine where it succeeds and where challenges remain. With regard to the latter, it then needs to diagnose the problems and find solutions that conclude with better outcomes for students.

Three practical examples include:

Developing individual learning plans for students and assessing the achievement of those learning plans. Institutions need to work with students to design pathways to success, for the student and the institution. These plans can be assessed on an ongoing basis as students achieve their goals and objectives.
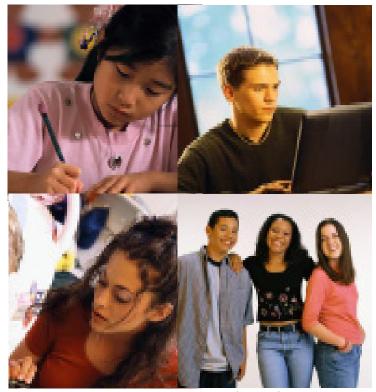
Mining institutional datasets to learn where students fail or fall. Most institutions have the data needed to diagnose problem areas. Any institutional research office can advice leadership of gatekeeper courses where students are lost. Analysis such as this can lead to proactive strategies

for improving student retention and success.

Surveying students, faculty members, and the community. Institutions should be asking stakeholders, from within and beyond, about what it does well and its role in the community. Survey data is not a replacement for more empirically-driven academic data, but does provide a reflection for the university to consider in reforming its activities in pursuit of excellence.

In sum, we understand that broadening participation in higher education is not a lightly-taken concept. It is difficult work, especially in the context of our current economic crisis where budgets are shrinking and enrollments are increasing. European institutions, through the Bologna Process, have an opportunity to make directional changes to create an even better tertiary system of education, and those of us outside of the EU should take notice because there is much to learn from this natural experiment.

www.educationalpolicy.org