

The university of the future

July 15 2008

In a world where economies are increasingly dependent upon high-level knowledge, higher education is a key national resource. But a Forward Look initiated by the European Science Foundation (ESF) shows that we need to know more about how universities, and other higher education institutions, are changing in the 21st century.

A team led by Professor John Brennan of the U.K.'s Open University has just examined what we know about today's higher education, and what we need to research further.

In the report of the Higher Education Looking Forward (HELF) project, Brennan he and a multinational team of experts point out that universities are as affected by internationalisation and globalisation as other actors are, ranging from people and companies to whole countries. In the past, universities have educated national elites and produced skilled people needed for local or regional economies. Now they are producing people for the global economy, but their local mission continues. This can expose them to financial as well as academic risk, and can call for more financial and management resources than many universities have available.

Brennan says: "Universities are constantly rethinking their strategy in the light of globalisation. But the expectations of universities are growing all the time and there are some pressures that are hard to balance. For instance, higher education institutions are being asked to produce more research, and also to teach more students in a more personal way. Perhaps more importantly, universities do not exist just to produce

economic benefits. They are also important in providing equity, social cohesion and social justice. How can they do this on a world scale?"

He suggests several new lines of research that are needed to improve our knowledge of the changing world of higher education.

Future research must, Brennan thinks, ask about the connections between contemporary social and economic change, the changes now occurring within higher education, and the roles of academics.

This big question leads on to other research questions:

- How are the changes in the balance of power between higher education's different constituencies affecting higher education's social functions and the way they are carried out?
 - Must universities adopt new functions and blur their boundaries with other social institutions to retain their importance in the knowledge society?
 - How do changes in the organisation of higher education institutions relate to changes in intellectual programmes and agendas, and to advances in knowledge?
 - Do different types of higher education institution have different relationships with the larger social and economic worlds of which they form part?
 - How do national, regional and local contexts help to determine the characteristics of modern higher education systems? What is the role of public authorities? How much do universities vary in the size and nature of their

international connections? What does this mean for their development?

- How might new forms of comparative research achieve a better understanding of the interactions between higher education and society, and the different forms these interactions take in different parts of Europe and more widely?

Brennan says that new forms of social science methodology will be needed to answer these questions. But without this new knowledge, we will not know how universities are adapting to the global world in ways that are compatible with their existing missions and their academic strengths.

Source: European Science Foundation

Citation: The university of the future (2008, July 15) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-07-university-future.html>

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