

# **Commitment to society: contemporary challenges for public research universities<sup>1</sup>**

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Globalization has substantially modified the nature of contemporary Nation-States as the principal organizers of capital accumulation and as bearers and creators of national identities (Castells, 1996; Evans, Rueschemeyer, & Skocpol, 1985). The Nation-State's progressive withdrawal from higher education, expressed notably in the reduction of public resources (Altbach & Johnstone, 1993; Johnstone, 1998), has implied an increasing competition for individual and/or institutional resources from the State and vis-à-vis the market (Marginson, 1997; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Pusser, 2005). Consequently, traditional autonomy of academic institutions and its professionals from both Nation-States and markets, has been notably reduced (Rhoades, 1998; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

## **Globalization and higher education: the economization of the university**

Due to globalization and internationalization processes as well as changes in the nature of Nation-States, initiatives for accountability have been promoted in almost every area of societal life. The public sphere has been put into question and the weight of market relations in every type of social interaction has increased. Globalization has been a product and has in turn promoted a growing economization of society and an erosion of all that is considered "public" (Wolin, 1981); changes in the nature and capacity of Nation-States (Evans et al., 1985); and continuous expansion of markets, particularly within the realm of education and the production of knowledge (Marginson, 1997; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Readings, 1996; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997); all of these contribute to explain the "reduction of trust" from societies towards universities, institutions that rely heavily on public resources.

This crisis of "publicness" and eroded societal trust in the realm of education has been expressed in permanent challenges to the efficiency, productivity, lack of equity, and low quality of large educational systems (Díaz Barriga, 1998). Critiques about the state of education and demands for accountability have put assessment, evaluation, and

certification policies at the core of public educational guidelines all over the world. Diversification and dissemination of academic and institutional assessment and evaluation is a consequence both of international dynamics generated by international organizations –such as OCDE or the World Bank [WB] among other —as much as a response to the adoption of the discourse and practice of evaluation and accountability by Nation-States and educational administrators at the local level (Bensimon & Ordorika, 2005; Coraggio & Torres, 1997; Díaz Barriga, 1998; Ordorika, 2004).

Higher education institutions, and the nature of academic work that is performed within them, have suffered changes that have no precedent in the history of postsecondary instruction (Barnett, 2000; Lyotard, 1990; Readings, 1996; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Until the 1970's higher education expanded continuously in student enrollments, number of faculty and availability of financial resources. According to the World Bank (2000) student enrollment ratios grew from 9% to 14% from 1965 to 1975, throughout the world, with low and middle income countries moving from 4% to 7% and high income countries from 20% to 33%. Since the 1980's, however, public resources for higher education has been reduced significantly in almost every country (Altbach & Johnstone, 1993; Johnstone, 1998; World Bank, 1994, 2000). Tertiary education expenditures per student percentages of GNP per Capita diminished from 163% to 77% overall from 1980 to 1995, with low and middle countries moving from 259% to 91% and high income countries from 39% to 26% (World Bank, 2000).

The fiscal crisis of universities has been accompanied, both as a cause and as a consequence, by a redefinition of meanings, goals, and practices of higher education. Ideas of universities as broad cultural societal projects or as institutions that focused on the production of public goods have moved into a marginal or solely discursive realm (Marginson, 1997; Readings, 1996). These notions have been substituted by a renewed emphasis on the links between higher education and markets (Marginson, 1997; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Pusser, 2005; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), by a scheme of “entrepreneurial universities” (Clark, 1998), by notions of excellence (Readings, 1996), by the centrality of managerial concepts and goals --such as “productivity” or “efficiency”--, and by the increasing privatization of educational supply and financing (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Globalization in higher education also becomes materialized, in a significant manner, through the emergence of new markets and market relations for higher education institutions and their “products.” The adoption of market practices or of those routines that try to imitate these practices (markets, pseudo-markets, or fictitious markets) have become some of the most relevant characteristics of contemporary higher education (Ordorika, 2002, 2004; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

### **Productivity and the hierarchical field of HE**

Higher education at the global level constitutes a world-wide field of power. Within this field elite research universities interact directly with each other within common global networks; they assume leading roles within national higher education systems and in most nations are closely implicated in government policy; and they also respond to more localized constituencies (Marginson & Ordorika, forthcoming).

The international field of higher education is uneven, hierarchical and permanently contested (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). Universities are positioned within this field on the basis of their historical circumstances, university traditions and local settings, particularly the possession of financial and cultural capital (Naidoo, 2004) as well as through position taking strategies which are also historically conditioned. To a great degree international positioning is based on adherence to international standards of research productivity (Marginson & Ordorika, forthcoming).

Research productivity is fundamental in establishing a university as a prominent institution, at the international and local levels. Institutions’ networking and global interacting potentials are strengthened --or diminished-- by their adherence to a dominant productivity model, which they constantly therefore reproduce, purposefully or not. Their national prominence and influence on public policy also become increasingly dependant on their research productivity and many times hamper the institution’s ability and commitment to local problems and constituencies.

With globalization international competition and stratification of higher education has become more salient and competition for social and academic prestige is more central. Institutional cross border activities and academic mobility have increased. Global communications and mobility have created the conditions for the emergence of a global

market in higher education. Consequently competition among elite universities is now worldwide and has moved closer to capitalist economic forms.

Positions within this global market are mediated by comparative rankings of research performance or university status (e.g. Shanghai Jiao Tong University report and the UK Times Higher Education Supplement). Worldwide attention to university rankings are a sign of the new global market. Comparisons reflect and reinforce the structure of these markets as a system of power. For example, the leading national research universities outside the Anglo-American world are now increasingly overshadowed by universities like Harvard, Stanford and Oxford this affects not just the global standing of those national research universities, but the position of those universities at home as well.

In this context, the perception of institutional and individual competition within an international market for higher education reinforces the presence of business like practices and concerns. The focus on research productivity and in a significantly minor proportion teaching productivity also, becomes central to the notion of institutional self-positioning in the world-wide field of higher education. The concern of public officials and university administrators is how to reach higher levels of research performance with the most efficient levels of investment in material and human resources. That is, how to increase academic productivity.

### **Hegemony and the narrowed role of the university**

University rankings show a highly unequal distribution of resources and status. The top research universities are from the United States with a few from the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Ranking measures themselves reproduce and strengthen this pattern of domination. They advantage wealthy nations that invest in science-based research and benefit English-speaking nations because English is now the only global language of research (Marginson & Ordorika, forthcoming).

More significantly, Nation and State building commitments of national and local universities lay far from international performance and productivity higher education standards. Orientation towards local constituencies, as well as impact on local, regional and national development, is difficult to measure and outside traditional criteria of academic performance and research productivity. International trends drive universities

away from indigenous commitments and diminish their role as State Building institutions (Ordorika & Pusser, forthcoming).

The outcome of this pattern of hegemony is that higher education is subject to a great degree of US domination. This hegemony is expressed through the normative character of an idealized model of the American research university and the stratified and competitive American public/private higher education system, which combines a high level of participation overall with an extreme concentration of wealth, academic authority, academic resources and social status in the leading universities. This model is very different to that which has developed in most nations, especially those in Latin America which historically emphasized the contribution of the university to national democracy and placed the research university at the centre of national politics and culture; as well as the more homogeneous systems of Western Europe, sustained by State investment, in which all research universities have enjoyed similar status and access resources.

This norm of the idealized American research university is propagated by international organizations --like OCDE, UNESCO and the WB-- in its advice to policy-makers in peripheral countries, and the conditions attached to WB loans. These narrow performance and productivity oriented higher education guidelines and policies have become essential components in dominant neo-liberal policy ideologies in most other nations. They constitute the foundation for mainstream research literature in higher education studies; and appear as unique and common sense alternatives in mainstream public debate. In this way the idealized model of research performance and productivity has been translated into simplistic recipes that are reproduced without sufficient analysis or critique in many countries and universities (Ordorika & Pusser, forthcoming).

### **Diversity and difference in higher education**

In spite of great similarities between systems and institutions in the world there has been no single idea of the university (Bonvecchio, 1991; Wittrock, 1993). On the contrary, diverse and distinct major university traditions operate at the national, meta-national or regional levels. Some models or traditions<sup>3</sup> are defined by national borders, or in some cases by post-colonial traditions, others are tied to cultural or geographical proximities. Even though some of these models have had more international influence than others, they have all represented robust university traditions in their own domains.

In this global era in which models, ideas and policies are freely communicated across national boundaries, it would be expected that these different traditions contribute collectively to the development of international higher education. We have noted here, however, that this is not so and that the hegemony and domination by the North American model and its “idea of a university” exercises a powerful, and many times disruptive influence at a world scale. Trends towards global standardization partly reflect the emergence of common guidelines and systems in higher education but they also evidence cultural and material differences and inequities.

Moreover, a narrowly defined idealization of the elite research North American model of higher education --which corresponds to a virtually unique relationship between university and industry, existing in the United States-- becomes harmful and dangerous when it is romanticized and transported to the rest of the world. Business inclinations as well as market orientations and market-like behaviors are characteristic of the top tier of US higher education institutions which have increasingly narrowed their role to knowledge production with significant capital accumulation purposes. Adherence to this paradigm in other central countries with distinct accumulation processes might become prejudicial. Harnessing public research universities in peripheral countries, historically more diverse in the range and nature of their tasks and social responsibilities, to research productivity and performance goals, as set through international standards by dominating systems and institutions, can easily erode public universities’ commitment to the broader society.

### **Diversity and commitment to society: universities in the periphery**

Institutions, policy makers, and even faculty and students all over the world have a difficult time in escaping these hegemonic trends. While there have been important instances of resistance, alternatives to the dominant model are virtually non-existent. In order to build alternatives and expand the notion of higher education contributions to society, there is a need to be aware of the homogenizing effects of productivity driven policies, their impact on the narrowing of university goals and the detrimental consequences on the social responsibilities of the university. For this purpose it is increasingly important to understand the loaded nature of concepts and notions of research performance and productivity that are so deeply linked to market oriented institutions of higher education.

In a process that we can label *marketization* or *comodification*, higher education has been aligned to the requirements and practices of diverse markets both at national and international levels. In this global context, research universities have been, willfully or not, integrated into a global market with a centrally established system of valorization through international rankings. These international rankings promote, reproduce and reify research performance and productivity indicators as unique sources of value and societal appreciation for higher education institutions and academic work.

Standardized measures of academic output become an international homogenizing force that throws universities of diverse origins, traditions and roles, into a common process of competition in uneven conditions and with unequal possibilities for success. In this way, the global higher education market works as a powerful mechanism that reproduces inequities between different types of universities, from diverse regions or countries with extremely differentiated access to intellectual and material resources.

The reproduction of the global market of higher education is based in two distinct but deeply interconnected processes: alignment and hierarchical stratification. Alignment, based on the normative character of the productivity oriented model that we have discussed above, and its homogenizing effect on diversity of projects and university traditions. Hierarchical stratification, through the establishment of a pecking order of institutions based on international status and power as compared with international productivity standards fashioned by those institutions that shape the hegemonic model.

Many universities in the periphery of the hegemonic model, certainly those in peripheral countries like Latin America, have maintained differentiated traditions and have played central roles in the development of Nation-States. Most of these have entered, willingly or forcefully, a conflictive process of conformity and homogenization towards the global hegemonic model. This constitutes an enormously risky transition for peripheral universities, and the countries in which these are based, by entering a process of subordination and unequal competition with the extraneous North American model of research universities and its top institutions. Legitimacy and rooting of national institutions becomes eroded by unfair and unjustified comparisons with the bearers of the productivity models. The distinctive character of national systems and universities is lost giving way to uprooted institutions that qualify lowly in international rankings,

and with diminished impact on national and local realities to which they should respond.

The emergence of an international higher education market poses a significant challenge for national research universities: the need to participate in the global realm of colleges and universities on the basis of their own nature and distinctive character, without diluting these in the face of hegemonic models and dominant international guidelines. Alignment and homogenization must be confronted through the recreation of different traditions and university models.

Given the diversity of regional and national contexts as well as that of university traditions it is impossible to think of a single alternative to the restrictive market driven hegemonic model. Central to this process is a reconstruction of societal appreciation of higher education based on a broader valorization of the contributions of higher education to society that go way beyond market interactions and fulfillment of administrative practices. It is possible to think along the lines of a broad set of university social commitments and responsibilities, to recreate the university as:

1. a privileged space for the articulation between global trends and national identities; the building of local social understandings and interactions between diverse cultures and beliefs; distinct ethnic groups and migrant or resident nationalities; as well as gender, class and other societal differences,
2. a unique institution of the public sphere, for reflexive understanding and grounded critiques of contemporary society and its relations with the environment (Pusser, 2006),
3. the only existing institution in contemporary society capable of bridging the gap between specialized knowledge and society as whole, in the context of the knowledge society and the information economy (Fuller, 2001),
4. the most valuable institution in the recreation and construction of contemporary shared values and societal understandings, as well as an essential space for the shaping and formation of diverse constituencies for a broad set of interactions within society and with its environment (these include formation for work and employment but go beyond these objectives), and



5. a fundamental establishment for the production of knowledge, addressing a broad scope of societal concerns, demands, and problems in diverse realms, both including and also moving beyond the narrow reach of production requirements and market demands.

In the face of a hierarchical field of domination and a hegemonic understanding of what constitutes a successful university in contemporary society, the challenge for peripheral universities is the preservation of diversity of traditions and responsibilities through a broad commitment to society. It is along these lines that a wide variety of alternatives, grounded on distinct traditions and historical conditions, should be developed in the recreation of multiple ideas of the university.

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<sup>2</sup> The Jiao Tong world ranking top 100 (2005) includes 52 US universities and 17 from other English-speaking countries, with the remainder from Western Europe and Japan.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring here to models such as the US *elite research university* (Geiger, 2004; Kerr, 2001), the *state building university* in Latin America and other peripheral countries (Ordorika & Pusser, forthcoming), or the *napoleonic* and *humboldtian* traditions in continental Europe (Flexner, 1994; Wittrock, 1993).