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Forces Affecting The University of the 21st Century

by Barbara B. Burn

Almost 25 years ago, I wrote "Higher Education in Nine Countries" for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, analyzing trends in higher education in France, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, the Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, Japan, the Soviet Union, and India. At the time, many of these countries were moving toward fundamental university reform, strengthening nonuniversity institutions of higher education in ways which took the pressure off universities, but also threatened their traditional role.

Debate then focused on the role of the university, the question of access to higher education in the face of increasing "massification," and concern over how ever-mounting costs could be borne by governments without their increasing intervention in university affairs.

Now, on the threshold of the 21st Century, we can look back at those trends noted in the late 1960s and find that many remain familiar, with some major problems still unresolved and perhaps unresolvable, and we can see that as an international community, we are traveling along a common path to the future. New concerns and more changes have been added to the mix.

What is the university apt to look like in the early years of the 21st century? Will its characteristics and involvements be much the same as what we see today, or, if different, in what ways? Should we today be trying to hasten the emergence of the future university

International Trends

or bracing ourselves for its arrival?

The Role of the University in Society

We have moved beyond the debate of whether the university should be an ivory tower of pure research, divorced from reality, or an institution of teaching.

Higher education is not peripheral to society's concerns, but essential to national development. Although the university is unable by itself to induce economic growth, it is looked to increasingly to contribute to it by advancing knowledge, stimulating inter-sectoral collaboration within the economy and between it and higher education, and expanding professional qualifications and opportunities for the people.

As market forces and societal demand increasingly drive educational policy, not least the rapid obsolescence of knowledge and skills, especially but

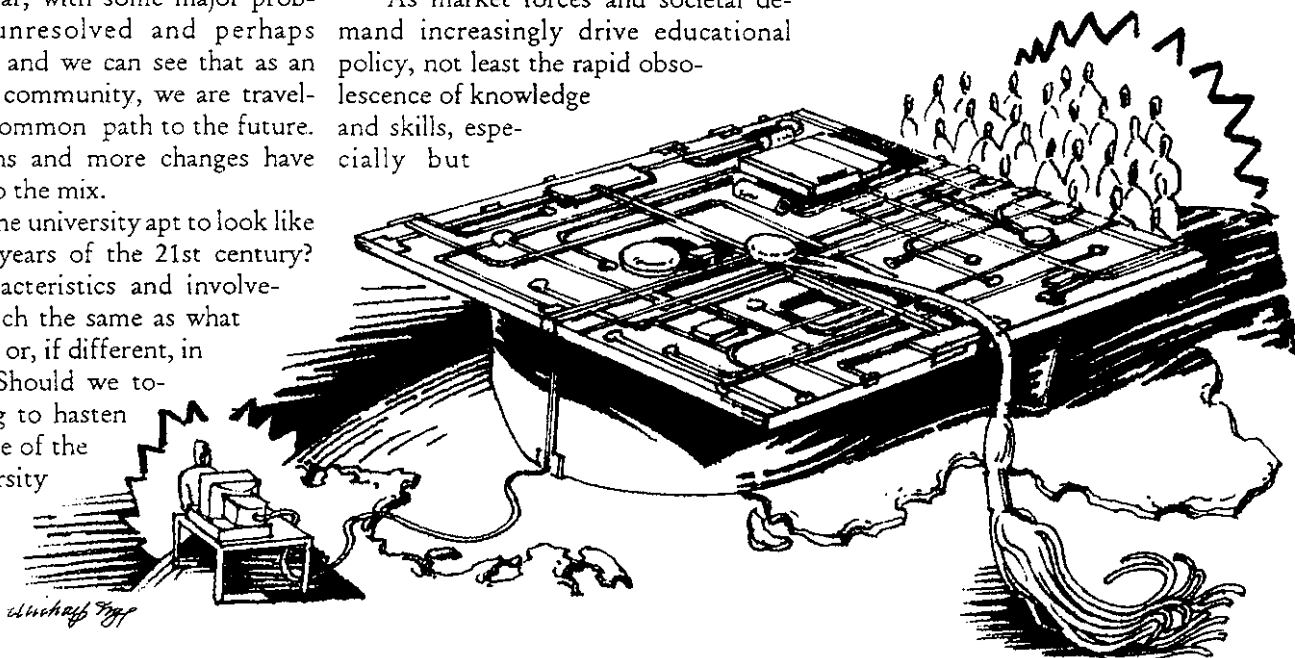
not only in the science and technology fields, the university response is increasing integration into the surrounding society.

Access to Higher Education

The trend toward providing a university education for the masses, where every secondary school graduate is admitted as a constitutional right, began in the 1950s. By the late 1960s, higher education enrollments had at least tripled in eight of the industrialized countries I studied, and the inability of universities to handle this growing demand had led to the launching or expansion of alternative kinds of institutions such as polytechnics, *fachhochschulen* and specialized institutes.

Enrollment growth continued in the 1980s: up 52 percent in Germany; 67 percent in Spain, and 60 percent in France.

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Between 1960 and the late 1980s, higher education enrollments multiplied by a factor of 9 in Africa, 4 in Asia and 9 in Latin America, fueled by generous government policies of open admission, free education, and in some countries, guaranteed employment for all graduates.

This very success is now threatening higher education in many nations as enrollments have swollen beyond existing resources. Easy access has often resulted in overcrowding, a strain on institutional facilities and faculty, very low pass rates, and in unemployment and underemployment for graduates in weak economies. Bad government planning in some developing countries is churning out an ever-increasing number of graduates with professional qualifications or technical skills in agrarian economies unable to absorb them. Even in prosperous Germany, overcrowding and a strained economy are leading to demands to shorten academic programs.

This "massification" of higher education continues to prompt reconsideration of what the functions of higher education should be. Who should have access? What should they study? Who should decide?

While many countries, such as Spain, France, the U.K. and Australia, are making provisions for continuing massification into the next century, a return to more restricted access seems inevitable in other nations. If in no other way, access will be restricted by the greater share of costs to be borne by students and their parents. This inevitably will raise charges of elitism by lower socio-economic groups, who already perceive serious inequities in regard to access.

Funding Squeeze

Threatening the future university is the long-standing funding squeeze caused by rising costs and numbers in higher education and the limitations of public funding stretched by competing priorities. As the level of required support has risen, government intervention in the affairs of universities has increased.

In countries which consider education an economic commodity, there is a

danger that post-secondary institutions will become mere training grounds, directed at vocationalism and responding to immediate demands. Often, these qualifications will have a built-in obsolescence and the institutions will not be producing creative, broadly informed individuals.

Furthermore, as faculties/departments are forced to compete with each other for funding from external sources, the integrity of institutions could be undermined. At the very least, such competitiveness can cause a tremendous increase in bureaucracy.

Changing Global Politics

To professionals in the international education field, a paramount force shaping the university of the 21st century has to be the reconfiguration of global politics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, international education and exchange are no longer an arena for the erstwhile cold war, no longer a vehicle of the hegemonial ambitions of Superpowers. Instead, they can and should target world problems.

Technological Development

Dramatic advances in communications technology and information systems will affect all universities in the 21st century. Already, global networking among educators worldwide is making instant sharing of research possible.

Moreover, technology is extending a university's reach to potential students beyond the traditional barriers of geography and time-tabling with self-paced distance learning programs which leap national boundaries.

Multicultural Values

Multicultural values and education, a swiftly rising priority in recent years in the United States, will significantly shape the university of the 21st century. Efforts in this area will encompass curricula, enrollment, staffing, management, and institutional mission. The university will be challenged to model and teach the values of pluralism and of the preservation, not homogenization, of cultural dif-

ferences and their contribution to national integration. This challenge will become yet more complex as ethnic differences and conflicts increasingly not just affect, but become part of international relations.

Global Interdependence

The 21st century presents urgent problems and needs to the university worldwide. The international sharing of knowledge and resources to help solve pressing global problems was underscored by the June 1992 Rio Earth Summit, attended by over 110 heads of state and some 30,000 delegates. Among the problems identified and key to the agenda of the future university are: ecological/environmental destruction, rampant pollution, galloping overpopulation, and grossly inadequate health and education provision, especially in the developing countries. University education in the U.S. and internationally must incorporate teaching about these issues into the education of all students.

The combination of the expanding demand for more and different kinds of higher education and the limitations in funding to support the demand, an increased awareness of the practical implications of global interdependence, e.g. the need for international centers targeted on global programs, for which a model is the internationally-dispersed centers of the United Nations University—all these impel the university of the 21st century towards greater international coordination. The resulting global network of centers of excellence focused on transnational concerns will set standards of quality and relevance for higher education worldwide.

The Future University

How the various pressures outlined above will shape the university of the 21st century will depend on many factors: size, level, location, mission, and leadership of an institution. The exponential rate of technological change in the field of communications—computers, interactive electronic links and net-

works—may transform the traditional scenario of a classroom with a professor and students of today back to the model of Mark Hopkins (an American 19th century theologian and educator) on a log. Just as the new technology will enable the consumer to buy groceries and much else without leaving home, so will it enable the student to buy into an education without leaving home, but with close faculty contact, through logging onto the computer—not sharing a log with Mark Hopkins.

The university of the 21st century which chooses to go with market forces and become more closely integrated with society will clearly be strongly local or regional in its orientation. It will very deliberately collaborate with industry, tailoring curricula to the professional/job needs of the community and area. It will cultivate good relations with local industry and other potential funding sources in order to help make up for the probable tightening of budgets for higher education.

The pressure to seek outside funding may erode the university as an institution, prompting its many units to communicate with their many voices. This would negate the assumption that the university can reach and advocate agreed priorities. The priorities commonly identified as institutional rather than only faculty/college/school-related would suffer from this tendency towards decentralization, even fragmentation. International programs and involvements will be among those hurt.

The growing priority for multicultural education—even though one cannot

predict at all how long it will be a force in the U.S. or other higher education—also may drive universities towards regional orientations. In their shared focus on cultural differences, multicultural and international education may be allies in the universities of the next century. The alternative of the one upstaging the other would work to the detriment of both.

Conclusion

As the hypotheses so far put forward imply, to predict what the university of the 21st century will look like is risky. The contours of individual universities will greatly depend on their particular circumstances, while still reflecting wider pressures and trends. Despite the difficulty of prediction, the following observations probably have some validity.

1. Continuing, if not increasing, pressures on funding will limit the program options, functioning, and development of the university of the 21st century.

2. Financial constraints as well as pressures from the economy will drive the institutions to enhance and affirm their relevance to societal needs, to job creation and training, and to professional preparation on a lifetime basis.

3. Distance learning and continuing education will play an increasing role in higher education. In affecting its delivery, they will also effect such areas, to mention only some, as student access, the role and assessment of faculty and the internationalization of higher education. The education may be international

in content and delivery in that it may well be beamed or bounced by satellite from another country or an international body.

4. Despite—or as part of—pressures that higher education respond to local and regional needs, the university of the 21st century will become more strongly international. This will evolve as a necessary part of preparing students for professional life in more careers as more and more become international. The university's efforts in international education will also increasingly have to give priority to transnational issues and problems, such as poverty, the environment, and health, incorporating them in undergraduate teaching programs and as part of their research agenda. ■

Barbara B. Burn is Associate Provost of International Programs at the University of Massachusetts. She writes, "I should acknowledge how helpful it was for me in writing this piece to have participated in early June in a meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia, of the board of the International Council for Educational Development. Our focus was the university in the year 2025. Fellow board members came from Britain, Sweden, France, Mexico, Italy, Ethiopia, and Japan."

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