

Thomas Weko



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In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario for diversity and equity in higher education?

Diversity of what? Diversity of students/learners? Diversity among providers of higher education? If you mean the second, I anticipate wider diversity with respect to providers of higher education, both within the public sector, and, in OECD countries where private provision is allowed, among private providers as well. Rates of participation will gradually grow, both among traditional age cohorts and among adults, marginally increasing student diversity by age and other characteristics. At the same time, students' social backgrounds will be even more closely associated with different types of programs, degrees, and institutions than at present, i.e. stratification is likely to increase.

Similarly, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario with regard to social equity and higher education?

The most probable scenario is a gradual increase in rates of participation, and this will be accompanied by increased differentiation in cost and reputation among providers of higher education, and wider differences in the economic returns to higher education qualifications. The first of these things is a traditional equity goal - wider participation. But I think it likely that this will be offset by widening differences in provision (including price) and in wider differences in returns to schooling that are likely to be associated with different qualifications and institutions.

In your opinion, what is or should be the most important objective for higher education in the future? Why?

Higher education must become more effective at developing the capacities of students - to earn, to learn throughout their lifetime, to engage in original thinking and research, and to be engaged, effective members of their communities. Higher education will need to do this for a wider range of learners (adults, those with disabilities, those with academic deficiencies), and it will have to learn how to do this efficiently, as past increases in resources will be difficult to sustain in the face of other spending demands, such as health care spending, pensions, and so on. Public authorities will have to figure out how best to organize governance, institutional funding systems, student support systems, and data systems to encourage these improvements on the part of higher education institutions.

What do you consider to be the main future challenge(s) for higher education systems? Why?

I expect that there will be very different challenges in different parts of the world, and even very different challenges with the same country, among different sectors of HE systems.

i. Demographic challenge: Countries with aging populations and already high levels of participation (e.g. Japan) will be challenged to maintain quality and the efficiency of spending while coping with declining enrolments due to shrinking youth populations. These pressures will be felt most heavily by institutions at the bottom of a hierarchy of prestige and reputation, and which are often most poorly resourced, but leave institutions of national/global standing unaffected.

ii. Diversity challenge: as student populations become more varied in age and social background, preparation for study, and aspirations, institutions are challenged to adapt to them. At the same time, public authorities are challenged rethink and redesign policies for more diverse students and institutions of higher education - including quality assurance, institutional funding, and student support.

iii. Governance challenge: public officials (and, indirectly, higher education institutions themselves) will be faced with continuing fiscal pressures and demands that higher education institutions be held publicly accountable for their performance, at least in much of Europe and the Anglosphere.

In your opinion, what would be the worst, but possible, way to tackle these future challenges? Why?

i. Demographic challenge: the worst response is to protect the existing institutions, since protecting the suppliers of higher education will result in great inefficiencies in public sector institutions and declining quality, especially in private institutions (stemming, for example, from the large-scale importation of ill-prepared fee-paying students from countries where demand exceeds supply). The likelihood of these outcomes is high.

ii. Diversity challenge: the worst way to respond to this challenge is to do nothing. For example, for higher education institutions to offer instruction as they have always done, without regard to the needs on different student populations, and for public authorities to maintain policies fitted to a different era, such as student support systems that are designed only for young, fulltime, and continuously enrolled tertiary students. The likelihood of these outcomes is moderately high.

iii. Governance challenge: either to do nothing, or to adopt policies that are simple-minded with respect to funding and highly intrusive with respect to the management of higher education institutions. Likelihood moderately high.

What do you consider to be the best possible way to tackle the above mentioned future challenges? Why?

i. Demographic challenge: governments should encourage institutions to diversify their student populations to non-traditional learners, while also encouraging consolidation and the coordination of operations among public institutions. This can be done, for example, by re-examining policies that establish separate institutional sectors (e.g. universities and polytechnics in Finland, and national and prefectural universities in Japan). Where private sector institutions are numerous and demographic pressures are strong, governments should establish a policy framework that protects students - e.g.

by providing meaningful public information about institutional quality, by ensuring that academic work can be transferred among institutions - but allows institutions to close or merge.

ii. Diversity challenge: institutions and governments should respond by thoughtfully monitoring who their students are, and adapting institutional practices and public policies to their needs. This may require new or improved data collection with respect to student populations (e.g. student surveys), new student support policies (that permit working adults/parents to receive support), and more flexible forms of study of study provided by institutions (e.g. recognition of prior learning) and supported by public authorities.

iii. Governance challenge: with respect to fiscal pressure, public authorities must help higher education institutions identify opportunities for efficiencies. This is very difficult, owing to the weak development both of cost accounting and meaningful evidence of student learning - without which planned improvements in efficiency probably are not possible. With respect to accountability for performance, governments and institutions should to work together to build information (e.g. data systems) that can provide credible public evidence of performance, and link public support to institutional performance very carefully, in ways that leaves institutions wider scope to manage themselves in meeting their core obligations.