

Grant McBurnie



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In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario regarding innovation and international mobility in higher education?

A likely scenario in the next two decades is international competition (at least among more developed countries) to address demographic change (in particular the variations in student numbers in the traditional 18-25 age group) by attracting international students (both from less developed countries and other developed countries) to fill domestic vacancies for university places (especially research students) and encourage them to stay on as skilled migrants.

The most desirable scenario is international cooperation to effectively address: mutually beneficial approaches to the relationship between student mobility and skilled migration; developing/refining internationally transparent and comparable information about education programs; good governance principles for public, private and hybrid providers; ongoing refinement of quality assurance principles to keep up with (or anticipate) innovations/developments in international education.

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

Only one objective? Ensuring equitable access to affordable, quality education that strikes an effective accommodation of the following: equipping graduates well for the workforce/professional life (and any subsequent updating of professional readiness); addressing national priorities; wider community engagement (playing a constructive role in the issues affecting people, public debate etc so that it is not only staff and students that benefit from higher education); promoting international cooperation.

Maybe that's more than one objective (though I did fit the parts into one sentence ... semi-colons are very handy!).

Short version: higher education should be beneficial to as many people as practicable, even if they don't attend.

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

1. As mentioned above, it's no surprise that one major challenge will be demography. Many countries face a combination of relative decline in younger population (the main university catchment age) together with a relative growth in older population (cranky old baby boomers, requiring major health

care expenditure, and pension payments - so, a squeeze on budgets). There will be increasing international competition to attract students (to keep numbers up and the cost-per-head down); to attract postgraduate students to fill research gaps; and also to attract skilled migration to fill labour gaps. These priorities must be balanced with maintaining educational values, and an ethical approach to issues of "brain drain". I have already heard some folks in education departments saying "we are concerned that we don't want to become de facto migration agents" (and priority given to "those who will stay", compared to academic merit "those who have the grey" [matter ie brains], and the revenue focus on "those who will pay" - not that these are mutually exclusive).

2. Effective governance of higher education systems, in a scenario where there may be a proliferation of different provision across borders: further growth of internationally mobile programs and institutions (some of them perhaps of dubious quality) that can fall between regulatory cracks; and growth in programs aimed primarily at attracting international students to stay on as skilled migrants (and may also result in some provision of dubious quality, and a skewing of resources into job-oriented programs).

3. Effective quality assurance, for the same reasons mentioned above

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

The worst ways would be

1. Either extreme of a laissez faire (or leave it to the market) approach to educational mobility (in which quality and public confidence may suffer), or a protectionist approach that reduces the options for access to education. Neither extreme seems likely to be sustained (though there are some examples of protectionism already, and some cases where it can be argued that foreign providers should be more closely regulated).

2. A scenario in which there is an overabundance of programs aimed at filling student/labour shortages, with the effect of "student poaching", education as de facto migration agency, and brain drain for less developed countries. That is a more likely possibility.

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

Cooperation between: different ministries within countries (eg education, immigration, foreign affairs) to coordinate priorities; cooperation between countries to develop guidelines principles etc and to share information; cooperation between institutions and other organisations to develop coalitions (perhaps language-based, or diaspora based, or combinations of aid and trade oriented) taking innovative approaches to international education.

The main risks are that: (1) education will be unduly driven by other considerations (migration, revenue raising), to the detriment of quality and balance (2) countries develop cooperative instruments that do not have any practical effect (3) the imperatives for competition will outweigh or undermine efforts at international cooperation.