

Dirk Van Damme



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

If I have to define the most important objective of higher education in the future I would like to take a rather conservative position and still define it as 'knowledge creation and transmission'. It is not only rhetoric that we will develop into knowledge-intensive economies and societies and higher education should maintain its crucial contribution to this. It will not be the only institutional environment active in the domain of 'knowledge creation and transmission', but it certainly should still be a crucial one. I believe that only higher education institutions such as universities have the potentiality to guarantee the layers of knowledge creation that are really essential: exploring the boundaries of knowledge, questioning and falsifying existing knowledge, working on 'deep' knowledge, developing socially and culturally critical knowledge, etc.

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

The first main future challenge will be to cope with the loss of monopoly on the educational and research functions. There are many competitors around and the mechanisms which have guaranteed a more or less automatic recognition of the functions and position of universities are eroding. A good example is the disappearance of the monopoly over degrees and diplomas as 'testifiers' for high-level skills and competences of graduates. I am afraid universities still don't see that employers increasingly are critical on degrees awarded by universities.

The second, related to the first, challenge is in my eyes the development of global markets of knowledge. Universities have a hard time in balancing their local, national and global roles. As products of 19th- and 20th-century nation-states, they still are very attached to the regulatory environments coming from national governments. In the meantime global markets are developing in research and increasingly also teaching & learning. I personally think that more market doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing in higher education and that it would even be beneficial, but it certainly will need other mechanisms and systems of governance, regulation and management and I

don't see a sense of urgency in developing them. The naïve and superficial approach to rankings we can see today will certainly not be the best way to tackle this challenge.

A third challenge in my eyes would be that, as a consequence of the previous ones, higher education will find itself not in the position any longer to attract the best talents in society. This refers to attracting the best students as well as the best researchers and professors. If we are not attracting and concentrating the best minds in institutional environments that we define as universities today, the critical knowledge creation function will suffer from it. This would be a bad scenario for higher education, but also for society at large.

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

The worst scenario in my eyes is the so-called 'disappearance' of universities, in the sense that they would become rather irrelevant in the processes of knowledge creation and transmission. Universities in their institutional arrangements as we know them nowadays may disappear and exchanged for other institutional types and whether we will still call these institutional environments 'universities' is another question. But that's not what I mean. My worst-case scenario would be that both the research and teaching & learning functions would be taken over by completely different kinds of institutional arrangements and environments. This scenario is not very likely to happen, but still is possible. It will depend on the adaptability of universities to the changing global context whether this scenario will become reality or not.

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

The best possible way to tackle the mentioned challenges would be a rather fundamental and drastic change in the regulatory context in which universities have to operate and in governance and managerial arrangements within universities themselves. The national regulatory systems will have to be transformed into international and open regulatory systems. I still think that rather strong regulatory systems will be necessary, because there are too many risks in radical deregulation for safeguarding quality standards. The international governance and managerial arrangements in universities also will have to change: further professionalization of management, modern accountability systems, governance systems which can tackle the risk of mission overload, and, overall, a drastically improved strategic management of universities.