

Eva Egron-Polak



Eva Egron-Polak is Secretary-General of the International Association of Universities (IAU), an international Non-Governmental Organisation based at UNESCO in Paris, France. Bringing together Higher Education Institutions and Associations from every region, IAU is committed to strengthening higher education worldwide by providing a global forum for leaders, undertaking research and analysis, disseminating information and taking up advocacy positions in the interest of quality higher education being available to all. With a long experience in international cooperation in higher education, and now as head of IAU, Eva Egron-Polak is engaged with many of the most pressing issues in current higher education policy debates globally, such as internationalization, cross-border higher education, higher education for sustainable development, and equitable access to higher education, among others. Prior to joining IAU, she was Vice President (international) of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. She was educated in the Czech Republic, Canada and France.

Page | 23

In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario regarding the role of higher education institution?

My position at the International Association of Universities situates my perspective mostly at the macro/global level. Looking at the 2030 horizon chosen by the conference, and given the changes taking place in all aspects of life, it is rather difficult to predict with any level of accuracy. So my comments are an extrapolation of current trends, though it is quite possible that seismic shifts could happen. With that caveat, the most probable scenario that I think we will see is the development of a highly stratified (nationally and globally) and still much expanded system of higher education. Universities and other HEIs will be perhaps less differentiated on paper but more so in reality in terms of quality and real mission. The number of institutions will continue to increase to provide more access - so the base of the HE 'pyramid' will grow and competition for being at the top of the pyramid will be very strong. E-learning will become a major part of all institutions' offering but e-learning will also continue to expand on its own; this may turn to be the mass higher education, while highly personalized and selective institutions will focus on intense personal attention. The private (commercial) part of the system may become bigger in terms of enrolment than the public sector. China and India will be major players both in terms of the top institutions and in terms of numbers of graduates. Basic/blue skies research will be concentrated institutionally and networked geographically. Regulation will be strong at the local level to ensure some level of equity and quality and there will be several regional and even global regulatory bodies working on a voluntary basis to ensure quality and transparency among various sub-systems - ie. Groups of similar institutions will and together to self-regulate. Mobility will grow steadily but more or less keeping on par with overall growth of numbers rather than expanding much as a proportion of all students.

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

HE, at the systemic level, does and should continue to have multiple objectives including research to address major global issues in addition to research for economic competitiveness and innovation and education on a continuous basis to prepare people for the labour market and more generally for life in society facing complex problems. HE's most important role - as it serves ever growing numbers of

people, should be to empower citizens to make considered choices among many options - practical, moral, etc. and to be adaptable to changing circumstances. HE needs to remain an objective and critical commentator, using its analytical, research and dissemination capacities to forecast, communicate and thus help prevent or at least predict the consequences of certain developments in all areas of life - economic, political, scientific, social, cultural, medical, environmental etc. This does not mean that all HE institutions need to have the same set of objectives and missions, but at the systemic level, these are the roles the HE objectives system should play in the future.

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

- A. At systemic level the issue will be how to continue to expand access while maintaining equity and quality, recognising that in different contexts, the challenges to meet this objective are vastly different and requires different policies
- B. Under pressure of funding and accountability, how to avoid a system that is largely populated by more narrowly instrumental/utilitarian training institutions exclusively serving the world of work, yet at the same time, finding ways to respond to broader student learning needs to prepare citizens not only workers. Expected learning outcomes must be carefully and broadly defined.
- C. Retaining the nexus of research/scholarship and teaching to ensure continuous innovation and improvement in the pursuit and transmission of knowledge
- D. Creating an HE system full of institutions with different missions that are recognized and valued as such by the students, employers, and society more widely so that societal needs and individual aspirations can be met.

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

Two 'nightmarish' scenarios are possible: a) abdication of the role of the state, allowing the private sector and the market to drive the responses to these challenges and b) a controlling state that makes most of decisions. As each currently exists in reality in some countries, they are certainly possible but neither is effective. The market cannot respond to equity issues, the controlling state cannot provide sufficient flexibility to allow for continuous innovation and the need for responsiveness.

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

At the risk of using the standard cliché, solutions lie in finding the appropriate balance among competing and often contradictory demands and identifying, for each society, context and moment in time, the approach that will be most responsive to the most pressing needs of a country and to the largest segment of society. Such an approach includes regulation at the system level by a state that is well informed and has a vision, sufficient investment from public and private sources that are allocated to promote both quality and accessibility, coordination of many actors and cooperation with stakeholders. Innovation in all aspects - curricular, organizational, technological, in governance and management, in linking with society etc, and thus some level of risk, need to be encouraged and accepted, respectively, at the institutional level. The main challenge lies in the fact that the status quo suits large numbers of people and reforms are neither always positive, nor always successful. As

well, change in many areas is rapid but in other areas it takes time to bring its full benefits. Time-frames are continuously being shortened - for government policy makers due to election cycles, to institutional leaders due to shorter terms of tenure etc. Dialogue and partnerships between state, institutions and private sector as well as all stakeholders needs to be on-going; the vision of the way the system ought to evolve needs to be clear and shared; rhetoric must be matched by actions and resources and success needs to be made well-known. Finally, the approach needs to be tailored not so much to a particular ideology but rather to the socio-economic and political realities of each system.