Implications of the change from elite to mass or multi-purpose institutions

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Introduction

The transition from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ institutions has a wide range of implications and consequences for the universities involved, as well as for the societies they serve. This paper explores implications for one of the core functions that universities perform, education. I begin by distinguishing between two meanings of ‘elite’ exclusiveness and show that the two have partly different implications. I move on to suggest that rather than a uni-directional transition from elite to mass education we are witnessing a co-evolution of the two. One consequence of this co-evolution is that more financial resources will be required than if we were ‘merely’ dealing with the additional costs of increasing student enrolment. With those observations as a platform, I explore in greater depth the implications of increasing costs for higher education, focusing particularly on implications with regard to strategies for increasing cost-effectiveness and activating new sources of funding. Finally, I turn to the labour market, asking, first, how the supply of candidates and expertise is likely to square with demand, and, secondly, how universities might respond to problems of ‘incongruity’ between the education provided and the skills demanded.

Dimensions of elite education

To determine the consequences of a transition from elite to mass education we first of all need to define these concepts. Martin Trow’s [1] definitions have been widely adopted, so I will take these as my point of departure. Trow defined ‘elite’ education as the preparation of a fairly small proportion of cohorts (at most 15%) for exclusive occupational roles involving membership of an informal ‘ruling class’. Conversely, he defined ‘mass’ education as the transmission of skills for a fairly broad range of technical or professional roles to a larger proportion of cohorts (between 16 and 50%). Note that both definitions refer to two dimensions: enrolment rates and privilege in the labour market. The two are clearly related, but should not be confused. Most of this paper deals with the former, but I will revert to the labour market in the final section.

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In many policy debates about enrolment in higher education two notions of exclusiveness seem to be in play, one social, the other intellectual. Both are important, but, in addition, is the distinction between them. The more discriminatory and rigid the social stratification of society, the weaker the correlation between the two is likely to be. In all European countries the social gap in access to higher education has been significantly reduced since the middle of the 20th Century. In Finland, for example, differences in participation in university education, as measured by the ratio between children from ‘academic’ families and others belonging to the same cohort, have been reduced over three generations, from 19.1 to 8.2 [2]. This is a truly significant change, but equally striking is the fact that even today enrolment rates differ substantially among social groups.

The impact of increasing enrolment on the intellectual capabilities and performance of the student population is not all negative. The performance of the marginal student, i.e. the student who just meets entrance requirements or just decides to embark upon higher education, is likely to decline as enrolment rates increase. Clearly, any notion of elite would have to be stretched quite far to include 30–50% of the population. However, the total number of highly talented students will almost certainly increase with enrolment. In other words, more intellectual talent will be cultivated as enrolment rates go up and social barriers are overcome. Moreover, a higher proportion of the student population will come from families where at least one parent has university level education. This does not necessarily make these students more talented, but in a broad cultural sense it is likely to make them better prepared and also more likely to receive encouragement and support from their parents and peers. They are, in other words, more likely to see higher education as the appropriate preparation for a future career.

Much of the concern expressed over the impact of mass education on performance levels has centred on students. The transition is, however, likely to bring about change also in the ranks of faculty, increasing the proportion of the population working in universities and colleges. The impact of this change on intellectual performance levels will depend on how well universities succeed in competing with other employers for ‘the best and the brightest’. Overall, however, the pattern will likely be similar to the one described above for students.

Co-evolution of elite and mass education

Today, student enrolment in Europe (and many other countries) is in the range defined by Trow as mass education. Moreover, most of the growth in student enrolment has come in (new) institutions that are not prestige research universities. At the same time, we also see growth in elite institutions and programmes. Over the past decade or two, several European governments, and the European Union, have increasingly promoted ‘excellence’ in education as well as research. So have many university leaders. Arguably, rhetoric has outpaced action, but a number of ‘excellence’ initiatives have been undertaken, leading to increasing differentiation between ‘elite’ programmes and institutions on the one hand and those living on more ‘ordinary diets’ on the other. In well-known university rankings
(such as those published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and The Times Higher Education Supplement) we find huge differences in scores between the top ten and the middle-range crowd. These differences may well become even greater in the future. We do have elite universities! In fact, some elite institutions and programmes may well thrive in a mass education society. ‘Massification’ of higher education combined with strong international competition is likely to strengthen demand for pockets of excellence and exclusiveness. What may at first look like an unequivocal trend towards mass education societies may in fact be more accurately described as a particular kind of co-evolution of elite and mass education.

**Consequences: the higher education system**

**Funding**

Arguably, one of the most profound consequences of the development described above will be a substantial increase in the overall costs of higher education. With a higher student population, total costs are likely to increase. If I am right that we will see a co-evolution of elite and mass education, the overall increase will be higher than what would be required to cover merely the additional costs of a higher number of students. Moreover, with a larger proportion of the population in higher education, the financial burden is likely to increase also in relative terms. From these two observations we may derive at least two implications. First, the financial burden will lead universities as well as governments to search for cost-effective modes of education. The challenge to be faced is one of cutting average costs and, at the same time, meeting the needs of the marginal student for more learning support. Secondly, universities will not be able to meet this challenge only through productivity-enhancing measures. Therefore, additional efforts to mobilize supplementary sources of funding can be expected.

**Cost-effective modes of teaching**

How will this financial squeeze affect the quality of higher education? The answer depends on how universities and governments respond to the challenge. Let me briefly explore three likely responses and see where they lead.

First, one way to cut average cost is to expand in low-cost rather than high-cost programmes. As student demand for higher education in Norway increased substantially in the early 1990s, the government’s response strategy combined strict regulation of access to high-cost professional programmes (such as medicine and dentistry) with open access to most of the humanities and social sciences. This policy provided access for a large number of students who would otherwise not have been able to enter higher education. It did, however, lead many of them into programmes that were not their own first choices. Moreover, it skewed the supply of candidates in a direction that did not square well with the demand of the labour market. For the government, this policy may nevertheless have been the best option available. It enabled universities and colleges to accommodate a substantial increase in the overall demand for higher education and it did so at a price that the electorate was willing to pay.
A second option is to cut back on labour-intensive components such as active training in laboratories (‘dry’ as well as ‘wet’) and individual supervision. Active training is generally recognized as an effective mode of learning and equivalent results are often hard to achieve through more passive modes of teaching. For some purposes, however, new information and communication technology offer interesting opportunities for supplementing, or even replacing, real with virtual training. Moreover, recognizing the risks involved in cutting back on activities that are considered essential to programme goals or to the future recruitment of students, many universities try hard to keep activity levels up by, for example, replacing high-salary faculty with cheaper teaching assistants or by increasing group size. In favourable circumstances, creative use of these or other strategies can provide some scope for reducing costs without sacrificing quality. Many universities are, however, likely to find themselves lacking the flexibility required to make good use of such opportunities. Furthermore, for many purposes, clinical training being perhaps the most obvious example, opportunities for cutting back on direct involvement of fully qualified teachers are severely limited.

Thirdly, modern information and communication technology provides multiple opportunities for making lectures, seminars and many other types of web-based material accessible to students (and the wider public) twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Various types of interactive tools, for simulations, exercises etc., are already available and many more can be developed. Perhaps as fundamentally, the development of ICT (information and communication technology) provides new opportunities for de-coupling the transmission of knowledge from the production of knowledge. Many students would probably find a professional communicator more effective than the average faculty member in explaining complicated matters. Imagine actress Julia Roberts laying out the principles of logistic regression (in front of the fireplace) or Tom Cruise leading students in a virtual walk through the city of Rome for an introduction to distinctive features of classical art. More to the point, opportunities of de-coupling transmission from production raise questions about greater differentiation of faculty roles, with some specializing in professional teaching, others in research. Admittedly, such a strategy of differentiation has its limits, particularly in technical and clinical training. Moreover, severe limitations are inherent in the format of prefabricated recordings. A recording of even the most inspiring and effective teaching performance can be a very attractive supplement to real teacher–student dialogue, but only to a limited extent serves as a substitute for that dialogue. Nevertheless, the rapid development of ICT provides a wide range of new opportunities that most of us have only begun to explore.

In theory, the potential for providing high-quality education at lower average cost is probably greater than faculty and university leaders like to admit. We may, however, safely predict that actual achievements will fall short of the full potential.

**Supplementary funding**

As the total cost of higher education increases, governments, as well as universities, are likely to be looking for supplementary sources of funding. Supplementary funding may come from at least two sources. One is the students themselves,
or their parents. In several European countries, tuition fees or some functional equivalent have already been introduced for public sector universities. The more widespread this practice becomes and the higher the fees, the greater will be the pressure upon neighbouring countries to adopt similar measures, at least for defensive purposes. Austria may serve as a case in point. The introduction of tuition fees by some German states leads more German students to Austrian universities where education is still free of charge. As access to public universities is also largely unrestricted in Austria, Austrian universities find themselves in a situation reminiscent of Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ [3]. His conclusion was sombre indeed:

“Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.”

Universities, and their students, try to avoid this tragedy by demanding a substantial upgrading of governmental funding to increase capacity and secure adequate quality of education and research. Faced with demands for more ‘taxpayer money’ for several other purposes as well, at least some politicians respond by considering major changes in the current system, notably the introduction of *numerus clausus* quota provisions and/or ‘*Studiengebühren*’ (tuition fees) [4].

Another possible source is private foundations, companies and other non-governmental sponsors. Financial contributions from such private sources may come in different formats, from scholarship programmes to support for particular programmes or groups of students, to the establishment of private institutions. The latter option is likely to be most attractive in areas with high student demand and low investment and overhead costs. In many countries, these are areas in which public universities are able to operate with a ‘surplus’ that they use to help fund more expensive programmes. Unless the system for government funding is closely coupled to real differences in marginal costs, expansion of private education in low-cost mass education areas may well leave public universities worse off (see Chapter 7).

Conventional wisdom suggests that the marginal student will be the most sensitive to higher costs and therefore more likely than others to react to tuition fees by dropping plans of university level education. Moreover, in a society that has grown accustomed to free education, the introduction of tuition fees is likely to generate feelings of disappointment and resistance. Such reactions may lead to a short-term drop in enrolment rates. Longer-term impacts on enrolment patterns and completion rates are, however, likely to depend primarily on factors such as opportunities for financial support to cover additional expenses and prospects in the labour market. The more generous the support available to the marginal student and the larger the increase in income that students expect to reap from higher education, the less likely are significant set-backs in the historical trend of declining social inequalities in the recruitment to higher education.

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2 Private schools and programmes are also common in niches dear to the sponsoring organization (such as performing arts).
Consequences: the labour market

To the extent that the development of a mass education society is driven by the kind of mechanisms described above, we would expect an imperfect ‘fit’ between the supply of graduates and the demand for expertise in the labour market. This is partly a matter of overall numbers, but probably more a matter of incongruity with regard to qualifications. In my own country, supply now seems to exceed demand in parts of the humanities and social sciences domains, while industry complains about scarcity of certain types of engineers and emergency steps are taken to educate more police officers. The more imperfect the fit between supply and demand, the larger will be the proportion of the student population that will find themselves in jobs providing only limited opportunities for applying and developing further the specific qualifications acquired through their particular programme. Moreover, in an era of globalization and rapid technological change, many will probably change jobs more frequently. For those who do, the ability to continue learning, to acquire new skills and to adapt to rapidly changing environments, will become increasingly important.

How can universities and other higher education institutions best prepare their students for these challenges? At least two basically different strategies seem available. One is to also re-orient ‘non-professional’ programmes so as to better provide the type(s) of qualifications considered important for particular categories of jobs or for a particular segment of the labour market. In practical terms, measures to increase ‘employability’ may involve, for example, more emphasis on ‘Business English’ (rather than, say, the English language in 19th Century literature), case-work focusing on current problems or opportunities of a particular industry or community, or practical training in a particular type of activity (such as memo-writing for decision-makers). The so-called Bologna process, a major reform programme aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area, was in large part inspired by a concern to make higher education more responsive to the needs of a changing society and labour market. In the words of the Trends V Report:

“...employability is a high priority in the reform of the curricula in all cycles.” [5]

However, the same report goes on to point out that:

“...there is still much to be done to translate this priority into institutional practice.”

My own experience as Vice Chancellor during the early years of the reform process in Norway confirms the impression of mixed results. In fact, at times it seemed that the ability to undertake the transformation required was negatively correlated with the ‘need’ to do so. For this, and other reasons, results often fell short of expectations.

An alternative strategy aims at providing education that can serve as a more general platform for intellectual and personal development. Such a strategy
may involve emphasis on analytical skills (to distinguish 'true' from 'false'), search, interpretation and integration of information, transformation of knowledge and understanding into options and solutions, and ethical reflection and moral judgement. These are ambitious goals, arguably more appropriate for elite universities than for the average mass education institution. For the latter, such a strategy is probably more risky in terms of student, as well as labour market, response. If successful, it may, however, take us as close as we can get to providing higher education for 'wisdom'.

References