International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM)
Volume 4, Issue 8 Aug. 2022, pp: 103-106 www.ijaem.net ISSN: 2395-5252

Strategic Foresight for Higher Education

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Submitted: 01-08-2022 Revised: 02-08-2022 Accepted: 08-08-2022

ABSTRACT
The rapid transformation of the socioeconomic, political, and technological context predetermines changes in the expectations for higher education institutions which face numerous profound challenges. In order to survive and develop under changing conditions, universities need to drastically rethink their development strategies. This paper substantiates the effectiveness of using foresight to tackle the challenges of uncertainties in higher institutions and strategically plan for the future of higher educations.
Keywords: Foresight, Higher education, technology

I. INTRODUCTION

A rapidly changing and turbulent environment as well as the complex conditions of socioeconomic development translate into a high level of uncertainty in the functioning of both private and public entities. Higher education institutions (HEI) are among those entities that must adapt to the changes in order to achieve their goals and to perform effectively [Clark, 1998]. The rapidly changing technical and socioeconomic environment creates new challenges for the management of organizations (Jamali, 2005). The shift towards the knowledge economy [Peters, Humes, 2003] and political transformations as well as the popularity of higher education is a source of many challenges for the universities all over the world. The changing social, economic, cultural, and legal conditions of higher education system affect the management and funding systems of universities (Kwiek, 2016Shattock, 2009). Universities will be able to maintain their proper place and role in society only if they are able to adapt to emerging challenges [van Vught, 1999] and manage a complex network of stakeholders [Labanauskis, Ginevičius, 2017].

In UNESCO's World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action, a number of challenges were posed to higher education institutions in all countries including "financing, equity of conditions at access to and during the course of studies, improved staff development, skills-based training, enhancement and preservation of the quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programmes, employability of graduates, establishment of efficient co-operation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation. At the same time, higher education is being challenged by new opportunities relating to technologies that are improving the ways in which knowledge can be produced, managed, disseminated, accessed and controlled." [UNESCO, 1998]. Even though twenty years have passed since the declaration was adopted, the challenges indicated in the aforementioned documents remain important and valid. They could be synthesized into three imperatives or dilemmas: 1) HEIs must prepare students for life and work in a rapidly changing world; 2) HEIs must strike the right balance between cooperation and competition as well as between mass education and elitist excellence; 3) Which public policy and which mode of governance is fitting for today's higher education? [Curaj et al., 2010]. In response, there is a tendency at HEIs to enhance content mobility, distributed learning, tailored programs, high-tech media centers and virtual learning communities. National policymakers strive to ensure this transformation by implementing higher education reform

UNCERTAINTIES AND COMPLEXITIES

There are many forces shaping university futures today. We certainly cannot assume that the next five-year strategic period will be in any way similar to the last. Business as usual is simply not an option despite whatever conservative

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institutional impulses might wish to pull us in that direction. Managing higher education in an atmosphere of austerity will be the challenge for some time to come. As Shattock (2008) argues, in this scenario it is those institutions that are able to preserve institutional cohesion and to hold on to institutional values that will come out of the recession in better shape. We are now clearly moving into a post-public era of higher education funding. With operating uncertainties increasing both structurally and specifically, there may well be a greater differentiation of mission among universities. All these uncertainties create the need for clear strategic planning, vision, and foresight. As Abeles (2006, p. 31) comments, "academic institutions need to revisit Shelley's Ozymandias," the central theme of which is the inevitable decline of the empires people build, however mighty they seem. Regardless of their status as medallion or lower tier institutions, their future is not assured in any form, much less as visions of time past. The future is uncertain and we need, as far as possible, to "future proof" our strategies.

One broad global overview suggests four drivers shaping the future of the university: globalism, multiculturalism, the Internet, and politicization (Inayatullah and Gidley 2000). Globalism (or globalization) and politicization could be regarded as long-term trends. Knowledge is now global and the university market is likewise. As a result, globalism has become a structural imperative, related to such issues as the "commodification" of education and the student as "consumer." Politicization can, of course, take many different forms, but in general refers to the definitive decline of the notion that knowledge and education are neutral, commonly-accepted public goods. This may lead to difficulties as does, of course, the rise of multiculturalism, itself a more recent effect of globalization. Reality is socially constructed in ways that are both gendered and racialized. The rise of multiculturalism means that the ideal university may eventually take different forms as various minorities seek to influence the inherited Enlightenment notion of the university as a place for the disinterested pursuit of truth. And finally the Internet, a dramatic revolution in the making of connections, will continue to decisively affect the purpose of the university and the way it conducts research, teaching, and publishing. The "virtualization" of the university has barely begun, and futures-oriented thinking is clearly required to understand the effects and fully grasp the opportunities.

MAJOR DETERMINANT OF HIGHER INSTITUTION FUTURE/FORESIGHT

Today, what is perhaps most certain as a major determinant of university futures is, in fact, uncertainty. To cope with uncertainty, universities will need to become increasingly more flexible. In their influential treatise Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty, Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons (2001) argue cogently that "universities may be unable to react rapidly and creatively to future demands if they are constrained within either a historically determined or bureaucratically imposed division of institutional labour" (p. 255). Despite the inherently conservative nature of the university, it has, at times, reflected upon its current and future role. Since Newman's (1873) iconic The Idea of a University, there have been intense debates regarding the university's teaching and research roles. More recently, Kerr's (1963) The Uses of the University argues that the modern university is in fact more like a "multiversity" with no single animating principle, but rather with a multiplicity of missions that respond to its multiple stakeholders. Within this decade, Clark's case study-based work on what he calls "entrepreneurial universities" has created a new and widely cited conceptual model (Clark 2004a, 2004b). Despite all the debates on what the mission/purpose/ethos of the contemporary university is or should be, there is agreement that today's universities are complex organizations. Universities, as part of their routine day-to-day work, inherently create uncertainties both in terms of knowledge generation and knowledge transmission and are perhaps uniquely qualified to deal with uncertainty precisely for that reason. By acquiring or developing the type of conceptual flexibility required to deal with uncertainty, universities will be better able to respond creatively to external demands. However, developing the ability to handle uncertainty—an acceptance of complexity or even chaos—should not detract from a university's fundamental, universal mission: the discovery of knowledge and its transmission to new generations.

The notions of uncertainty and complexity are the key parameters under which the university planner works. Barnett (2000) goes further, claiming that the contemporary university exists in an era of "super-complexity." He argues that the ideals of the university are dead and that the historical justifications for the university are no longer strong enough. In Barnett's opinion, the university needs to re-conceptualize itself around the notion of super-complexity, which stresses the

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way that flexibility, adaptability, and self-reliance have become the practical and discursive watchwords in the world of work. But, as one reviewer of Barnett's work notes, our conclusion depends on whether we see the university as existing in a period of late modernity or, instead, a period of "post-modernity," which would point us toward super-complexity as something fresh (Knight 2001). Such a period of post-modernity may create an operating environment in which universities will find new and more complex roles to fulfil in relation to society, the economy, and polity. Universities have reinvented themselves throughout the modern era, and we can expect them to do so again in the post-modern globalized information era in which we now live.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF UNCERTAINTIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION FORESIGHT

To deal with a necessarily complex and uncertain future, it makes sense for us to try to understand that future better so as to achieve some degree of foresight. To be clear, foresight thinking is not about forecasting or predicting. Rather, it is a futures-oriented methodology designed to identify opportunities and constraints in strategic planning development. Foresight emerged as a futures methodology in a number of fields following World War II. In the United States, it was deployed by the RAND Corporation in pursuit of military strategic planning. In Europe, France led the way with foresight as the main methodology used by DATAR, the national institute for regional development. By the 1970s, foresight was regularly deployed in the private sector (by Shell most notably) and used for a range of public sector policy analysis and technology assessment exercises. Essentially, foresight seeks to broaden our perception by scanning the future, detecting problems before they occur, and assessing the implications for current strategy of possible future events/tendencies. It seeks to shape strategy through a coherent futures perspective using both frontier-exploring science and a certain degree of intuition. Scenario planning lies at the core of the foresight approach. Scenarios are neither predictions of the future nor some form of disguised science fiction. They are, in fact, regularly deployed by military and business strategists and government planners as powerful tools for decision making in the face of uncertainty. Scenarios help us order our perceptions about alternative future environments. They are designed to present an internally consistent "story" about the path from the present to alternative futures. Scenarios need to be plausible more than probable. They are heuristic devices that allow us to explore critical future uncertainties as a way to prepare for unexpected turning points. The purpose of scenario planning is not to pinpoint events that might occur in the future, but rather to highlight large-scale forces that may push the future in different directions. For example, universities might be subject to one future in which globalization, e-learning, and the commodification of knowledge proceed unchecked, or they might find themselves in a future that is more national, local, or community-based.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND FORESIGHT

For universities to engage in foresight is logical, given their prioritized role as agents of knowledge production. In fact, it could be argued that a university is/should be an "institution of foresight" (see Slaughter 2002). Fifty years ago we could probably carry out our university strategic planning with some degree of security as to what the next five years would bring. The fundamental parameters of the world, of society, and of science were unlikely to change at the rapid rate now experienced in the 21st century. Today no such degree of certainty is possible. We need only reflect on the banking crisis of September–October 2008 and its repercussions across the globe to see how rapidly unforeseen events can unfold and, given the much greater interlinkages between countries, how rapidly and catastrophically they can spread. The university of the future will, of necessity, be futures-oriented. Foresight is set to be the epistemological platform for much of the strategic planning at universities from now on. In a knowledge society and in a knowledge-generating institution such as a university, it is only natural to engage in a knowledge-based activity like foresight. As Slaughter (2002) states, foresight "will become ubiquitously necessary as organisations at all levels struggle to 'find their feet' amidst the turbulence and create viable strategies for moving forward" (p. 9). Universities should be good at foresight because of their emphasis on creativity and critical thinking. Environmental scanning, for example, requires hard, analytical, and systematic thinking, but it also puts a premium on reflexivity, good judgment, and the type of intuitive approach more often associated with the humanities. The ability to grasp the big picture, think outside the box, and find uncertainty natural is something academics should take to as a matter of course. Visioning, Imagineering, and future thinking are essential not only for the university, but also for the university to

(re)discover a role in today's globalized knowledge society.

II. CONCLUSION

There are strong arguments in favor of strategic foresight, especially in times of economic and political uncertainty. Environmental scanning through critical foresight methodologies comes into its own in such periods. We need to consider carefully the verdict of Slaughter (2002), for whom futures studies represent a "paradigmatic turning point in the production and use of knowledge" and are a "sine qua non of a livable future" (p. 2). We need to grasp the big picture and to develop the tools, insights, and institutional software that allow us to develop robust strategies able to cope with uncertainty. In many ways, universities are uniquely suited to embrace strategic foresight because their scientists already inhabit the critical sphere where paradigmatic breakthroughs can occur. The contemporary university can neither engage in "business as usual" if it wishes to succeed nor can it just "wait and see" what the future will bring. Rather, we need to grasp the potential of strategic foresight as a critical planning tool that might at least to some extent construct the future we consider desirable for our universities.

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