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Universal Higher Education in the Global Era

Simon Marginson

University of Melbourne, Australia

*After 28 October:* Institute of Education, University of London, UK

Introduction

Analysis of the massification of higher education, including review of Martin Trow’s (1973; 2000) argument about transition from elite to mass to universal systems, is a fecund area. First, massification focuses not on the higher education sector as the horizon of itself, but on its role in society. Second, it brings most aspects of the sector into view. Since the mid 1990s there has been much work focused on the impact of neo-liberal government in the sector, and on globalization. Both neo-liberalism and globalization are usually modeled as external forces coming into the sector from outside (even though global integration and convergence, at least, are partly driven from research universities), as if the sector itself is both a given and an end in itself. Massification is more epistemologically inclusive. It allows us to acknowledge the sector is being transformed both from without and within, while setting aside the self-centred conceit typical of higher education studies. Its inspiration is more from sociology and maybe political economy. After all, the kind of society we have is a more important and more interesting question than the kind of university we have.

Martin Trow’s analysis now looks prescient in certain ways. As with Clark Kerr’s *The Uses of the Universit*y (1963) the Californian system turned out to be a good place to discuss, in that trends apparent there in the 1950s/1960s later appeared as generic trends across the world, such as the stratification of massifying systems and the continued survival of elite forms and institutions, the problematization of standards and the never-to-be-solved preoccupation with quality as the central medium of formal and informal regulation, and the partial empyting out of the collective student experience and the weakening of the distinctions between higher education and life. Trow talked about all these phenomena more or less as we now experience them.

At the same time we should not be surprised things have not worked out exactly as Trow expected. This is not simply because it is impossible to predict trends like the tax revolt, and digitalization and communicative globalization (which all also began in California) before they happen. It is also because there is a utopianism at the heart of Trow’s work, which reflects his belief—and despite some later skepticism, the belief never really dissolves—in the efficacy of the California higher education Masterplan as triumphant and apparently semi-spontaneous American social engineering.

“And in California and elsewhere, statewide master planning seemed to have answered the nagging problem of how access to the system could be ensured at the same time that the unique characteristics and high standards of universities and graduate and research centers were preserved. Not long ago the multiversity and the junior college seemed twin expressions of the American genius that had created first the common school, then universal secondary education through the comprehensive high school, and now mass education moving inexorably towards universal exposure to post-secondary schooling.” (Trow, 1973, 65)

“In the United States, colleges and universities … give substance to the idea that anything is possible to those with talent, energy and motivation. The sense of society with limitless possibilities for all, largely (though not exclusively) through higher education, is what is usually meant by ‘the American dream’. The end of the American dream is continually proclaimed, usually by intellectuals who never believed in it to begin with, and wished no one else would. But this faith, fundamental to the American political system, survives hostility and cynicism... Through its role in fostering social mobility and the belief in a society open to talents, American higher education legitimates the political system, and thus is a central element in the society as it is nowhere else.” (Trow, 2000, 6)

Kerr’s Masterplan depended, however, on a growing tax base and strong graduate throughput from community colleges to the state universities to the keystone of the system, the University of California (UC). Instead the tax base became capped by referendum. Once the resource base stopped growing, the Masterplan and the co-ordinating authority of the UC Presidency lost authority, and individual institutions no longer had an economic incentive to put their autonomy to work for the greater good. The system finally came fiscally unstuck in the 2008 recession, which forced the State Colleges to turn away qualified entrants for the first time and triggered sharp rises in in-state tuition that compromised the ‘society open to talents’. But it had been clear well before 2008 that upward mobility from the colleges was weak and participation in prestige institutions in California was closely shaped by the patterning of social origins just as is the case almost everywhere else. Increasingly, the private Stanford University and the University of Southern California had eaten into the social role of the UC system. Public universities are less steep than the Ivy League, and the myth has not yet lost all of its legitimating power, but it is more apparent now that the notion of a democratized elite always was a fiction.

It is likely that when future historians of the 20th and 21st centuries discuss universalizing education systems as a social project, they will focus on the utopian aspect. They will talk about how mass-to-universal education system builders in secondary and tertiary education set out at one and the same time, despite the limited resources and bounded social and political reach of institutional education, to create a universal high-skill economy, a framework of common and equal social opportunity, and a socialized democratic citizenry. And how those same system builders stabilized their project by entrenching the illusion it could all be done with no contradictions, no zero-sum competition for status, no loose ends, no child left behind. We now know it cannot be done, in education or anywhere in the capitalist world. We have yet find a way of explaining this, and of setting aside our dependence on the myth, for funding and legitimacy. Nor have we yet devised a new social bargain based on universal participation in education systems nested more thoroughly in their societies, and with more realistic and partial objectives than ‘limitless possibilities for all’.

This paper reflects on massification from a ‘bird’s eye’ global vantage well above the action. It reflects reading and engagement in empirical research, and is affected by what others have said about massification, but is essentially exploratory and partly speculative. It focuses on two central trends—the trend to universal participation itself, and the associated but only partly dependent forms of stratification found in universalizing systems. In this draft the argument is not supported by a literature review or new empirical data. Its purpose is to begin to build an historical overview. It is a first stab at synthesizing trends and issues. It discusses three questions:

* Since Trow (1973) what has changed? How has tertiary participation been affected by the communicative globalization of the last two decades?
* What is a high participation society? What are the *social* implications of universal tertiary participation?
* As universalization of tertiary education advances, what are the implications for *education*? What happens to universities, including their roles in social integration and reproduction?

There is also the perennial question in higher education studies:

* What is common/global about the trends to universal participation, and what is system-specific?

The Californian giants Kerr, Trow and Burton Clark all assumed that generalizations about the US and Californian systems would hold more or less as generic truths in the field as a whole (or if not, it did not matter, for they were speaking to US audiences, and other countries would copy the United States if they knew what was good for them). However, while American templates are undeniably important in higher education; while there is a one-world system of knowledge in science; while research universities have much in common; and while all governments are to some degree enamoured of the new public management; the differences in political and educational cultures across the world are profound and irreducible. The motors of development of higher education are not identical, as the rise of Post-Confucian systems in East Asia and Singapore has shown (Marginson, 2014). We will not claim that massification is ‘the same’ everywhere. We can better understand the trend towards HPS by exploring regional and national difference, as well as sameness.

Tendency to universal participation

In the last forty years the tendency to expansion of participation in tertiary education, and within that degree-level studies (OECD type 5A programs), has been universal to all but the poorest countries. This tendency is not linear. Growth tends to advance by fits and starts, interspersed with periods in which the curve plateaus and participation might even fall a little. Nevertheless the secular trend is clear and overwhelming. It is readily demonstrated using the UNESCO data base. It is striking that while age participation rates vary greatly, and only a few systems like South Korea, Taiwan and Canada are near the point where almost the whole age group enrolls at tertiary level, there is no stable resting point half way along the curve. Over time participation everywhere keeps going up.

The trend advanced after 2000. In that year the World Bank published a report on higher education in developing countries, *Peril and Promise*, which signaled a shift in policy thinking in favour of building degree-length higher education in emerging states/economies. Previously the Bank had placed overwhelming emphasis on primary education on the ground that its rates of return were higher—an artifact of the income forgone during periods of extended education. By legitimating mass higher education as part of the development process, rather than as an outcome of it, the Bank encouraged emerging states to meet emerging middle class aspirations while better providing for their own needs for trained personnel.

Tracking the trend in an internationally comparative fashion is not easy. Both the definition of ‘higher education’, and the streaming of students between different tertiary sectors, vary between systems. In the USA ‘higher education’ includes two-year programs in community colleges, while some nations reserve the title for degree-granting programs or for research universities. In some the overwhelming bulk of students are enrolled in type 5A programs while in others participation in shorter programs, often but not always with a technical-vocational flavor, is almost as large as participation in programs three-years or more in duration. Nevertheless the overall trend to growth in tertiary education is clear; and within that, it appears likely that in all countries taken over all there is an increase over time in the proportion of participation that is lodged in degree programs. This requires empirical investigation, but is a plausible hypothesis because such a trend matches the character of social demand for tertiary education, which is in part demand for opportunities and status.

This raises the central question of the main driver or drivers of the expansion of participation. That is a problem of sociology and political economy, one that is open to empirical investigation. Policy has answers, but at bottom they are normative rather than empirical, and they are not convincing. An examination of the policy literature suggests that tertiary expansion is driven (not just facilitated) by states; and that it is designed to meet the needs of the national economy for higher productivity human capital; or alternately, to provide equality of social opportunity to the whole population through participation in education. However, these are policy rationales for the expansion of participation, they are not drivers.

Is expansion driven by the growth of aggregate economic demand for graduate knowledge, skills and certified professional competences? This is the taken-for-granted assumption of many policy makers and social scientists. Again, it is not convincing. This assumption would suggest that the tendency to expansion is maximized during periods of high economic growth and falls during periods of economic downturn. But examination of the historical record suggests that in emerging economies at times the growth of tertiary education precedes the take-off of the economy (e.g. Kerala in India), at times they move lock-step, and other times and more often the historical growth of educational participation follows rapid economic growth (e.g. Taiwan, China, South Korea. Further, in mature tertiary education systems, recessions can be associated with the increased use of education as a shelter from unemployment and investment in better options in future (e.g. early to mid 1980s Australia), or alternately, a retreat from educational participation, perhaps because educational credentials have lost selling power at the margin (e.g. mid 1970s Australia). More generally, while economic demand fosters expansion of student places in fields short of labour at particular times (e.g. mining engineers in a mining boom); and while in some professions there is a tight fit between training and occupation (e.g. the training of doctors in many countries), the overall relationship between higher education and demand for labour appears to be incoherent. Consider:

* Across the world, many graduates do not work in fields in which they are trained, and many positions requiring specific training are filled by graduates from fields other than that of the designated occupation;
* much graduate labour is generic in character. This includes not only arts/humanities, the humanistic social sciences, the physical and life sciences and business studies, but also—in some countries—the phenomenon of many law or engineering graduates working outside the professional field;
* the trend to expansion of the relative weight of high-skill (‘graduate’) jobs is less clear-cut than the trend to the expansion of graduate numbers;
* phenomena such as credentialism, signalling behaviour and graduates working in non-graduate jobs seem to be at least as prominent as the expansion of high-skill work;
* there is no guarantee that graduates will generate higher productivity when they replace non graduates—productivity is a function of the demand for labour and of work organization (the effective deployment of worker abilities at work), not simply ‘caused’ on the supply side by the mix of skills provided.

This would suggest that the perennial debate about over-education versus overall shortage of skills can never be settled. Neither generalization can hold. The education/economy relationship is often indirect and non-instrumental.

While the evidence for economic drivers is patchy and inconsistent, the evidence for social drivers is strong and consistent. The secular trend to universal participation is best understood as driven by the advance of social demand. Everywhere, aspirations for tertiary education—particularly for the university degrees which carry the main status in most countries—spread to more and more of the population, reaching even poor families, remote communities and others under-represented. Study after study shows that (1) total aspirations have advanced over time, both in the spreading of those aspirations through the population, and the lifting of the average level of aspiration; and (2) families aspire to higher education both because it is seen to open up opportunities and provide better life prospects, and because it provides social distinction in itself. Both of these motivations can be understood as demand for higher education as a positional good, a source of relative advantage (Hirsch 1976; Marginson, 1997). This encompasses potential economic opportunities, higher social status (Frank and Cook, 1995), and cultural distinction (Bourdieu, 1988; 1996). The demand for higher education as a positional good extends beyond the boundaries of national systems to include demand for international education (Marginson, 2006).

All states must respond to the rise of social demand, and in enabling participation to grow they release the potential for more social aspirations, and so it continues. The main barrier to states enabling social demand is the fiscal cost. In some countries, the willingness of families to share costs is another relevant variable. But in the long run states give way to the pressure from below, while in many countries also ensuring that families meet a growing part of the cost of participation. As social demand rises the threshold of necessary supply rises, vice versa, and so on. The proportional growth of the middle class accelerates the process. From time to time states play with the notion of ‘over-education’ but they rarely accept its logic. Tertiary education is a primary instrument of social order as Trow pointed out. To sustain that role it must be progressively expanded and become more inclusive. Tertiary education is a legitimating mechanism that provides families with hope and sates ambition while channeling aspirations through a mechanism in which people feel at least partly responsible for their own success/failure. This reduces the pressure on government. In that respect the state in China is no different from that of Trow’s California.

Social demand is not a constant, it is culturally constructed and varies in time and place. As Trow notes, when participation approaches universal levels tertiary education switches from an opportunity to an obligation. The penalties of non participation in tertiary become more severe, because non participation becomes not just exclusion from the top half of the labour markets but exclusion from normal society. Globalization enhances this binary by fostering a distinction between globally mobile graduate labour and others whose personal capacities are more locally rooted. Thus though the average returns to degrees are falling, the gap between graduate and non graduate is maintained. It is probably enhanced, given that the binary distinction between inclusion/exclusion is more momentous. In most countries most of the time, this gap shows itself not only in social esteem but in rates of return data. Does this constitute a proof of the economic model? Not necessarily. It is more a case of rates of return data being used to explain a phenomenon that is social in character.

There is nothing new about this combination of declining average returns to credentials coupled with the maintenance of rates of return. These are the twin economic signifiers of mass higher education and they both underline the problems of non-elite institutions and explain their continued survival. The change in the mass-to-universal era is that the old constraints on the absolute level of supply are being progressively stripped away as the non-elite sector expands, even though the scarcity of elite institutions is maintained and often also enhanced. In other words, in contrast with the past many more people—if not nearly everybody—can choose to participate in tertiary education, and often also degree level education, provided that they meet minimum standards of eligibility. Australia even has a ‘demand-driven’ funding model whereby the federal government subsidizes a place for every student qualified to enter higher education, which in practice means any student completing school. (The subsidy, which varies by discipline, averages at 60 per cent of the cost of the place. The balance is paid by the student on an income contingent tuition loan basis).

In this context tertiary education starts to become a near universal right and social norm, in broad form at least, providing opportunities for self-formation for the clear majority of citizens—except that its universality is compromised by tuition cost barriers, and the unequal positional value of places in the different institutions and programs; and for some students, the experience becomes increasingly attenuated, scarcely ‘participation’ at all. This raises the issue of trends to stratification, and the meta-question about HPS: the character of mass education in the universal age.

Tendency to stratification

Advocates of system reforms pattern on the US template emphasize that the expansion of participation is necessarily accompanied by a division of labour between different kinds of institution in which some are more highly ranked than others, and research-intensive universities enjoy the highest status. This is usually described as ‘diversity’. A better word is ‘stratification’, because the diversity is at least as much vertical as horizontal. In any case, despite the repetition of the argument, the coupling of expansion and stratification is not essential. In abstract it is possible for any structural configuration to be associated with HPS. The Nordic systems couple high participation with egalitarian universities in which all are of high standard, together with vocational institutions that enjoy social esteem. In the United States equally high overall participation is coupled with steep stratification.

However, in one respect, the process of universalization prima facie encourages stratification. Further, in the present conjuncture, in most of the world, the trend to universal participation is associated with tendencies to stratification in certain ways.

The inherent structural factor is the economic cost of HPS. Egalitarian systems with low stratification between institutions and in the value of individual places are necessarily financed by governments from taxation revenue. In most polities it is not possible to finance free places of standard adequate quality across a whole HPS. Thus as participation expands, governments tend to favour systems with differentiated value, or shared financing. Once families pay part of the cost then stratification in the value of places follows automatically because families have a varied capacity to pay. While it is possible to maintain a HPS with low stratification it can only be done under limited conditions, principally a taxation base at Nordic levels.

What are the conjunctural factors that have encouraged stratification? The principal ones are the movement to World-Class Universities (WCUs), and in many stems the emphasis in policy and regulation on market competition between institutions.

Since communicative globalization began—and especially since the first global university rankings in 2003—global comparisons, the worldwide convergence of science and the networking of research universities have focused intense attention on the performance and standing of the leading universities in each country. League tables of WCUs have become signifiers of competitive national economic standing because of the assumed causal relationships between research capacity, industrial innovation and national prosperity. Whether this reasoning is sound or not, nations that do not have identifiable WCUs want them; and nations that do have universities of standing would like more, and would like them to be higher ranked. Only the United States, which dominates all world rankings driven by research science, can ignore the league tables. There has been a wave of investment in elite research universities in many countries, including Japan, Korea, China, Singapore, Germany, France and Russia (Salmi, 2009). All else being equal these investments lift the selected institutions further above their national systems, enhancing stratification.

At the same time globalization, by enhancing the relative standing of all research-intensive universities everywhere, exacerbates international stratification between systems. Only some nations can support WCUs. Nevertheless, emerging states want WCUs because they signify emergence. Many have set targets for 2020 and 2030.

It can be hypothesized that there is a *universal tendency to bifurcated systems*, consisting of rising elite WCUs coupled with mass tertiary education institutions, generally nation-bound and local in orientation, and whose relative position is forced downwards by the WCUs. This tendency can be modified by compensatory national policies designed to shore up the non-elite sector, but such moves are not automatic. If this tendency to bifurcated and unequal systems is a general one, then middle institutions everywhere—universities and colleges with some standing, e.g. in research and/or a leading role in servicing local populations, sitting between the elite sector and the mass institutions with low positional value—are placed under growing pressure. However, system structures vary, including the steepness of national hierarchies (the degree of inequality between institutions in their research functions and the positional value of degrees), and also the size of the middle layer.

Empirically, we need to know much more about stratification. We focus too much attention solely on aggregate participation, even though it is often pointed out that what matters is not access to much as access to what. In truth both are important; but many policy makers prefer to ignore status differentials and treat all participation as equivalent. (It is easier for government and especially institutions to expand aggregate participation than to change the social distribution of access to the most valued student places). In research, we need to measure differences in value between the credentials associated with institutions and disciplines—salaries, employment rates, social status. We need to match institutional stratification, social stratification and data on social mobility. We need to track the value of elite institutions, and better understand the credentialing power and formative effects of mass institutions.

Structures and instruments of stratification vary markedly by system. These differences partly govern the stratification effects association with massification. These structures and instruments include the existence of tertiary sub-sectors with differing missions (e.g. the binary systems in Germany, Netherlands, Australia, Russia), classification systems that enforce mission differentiation (China, the United States), public/private/for-profit institution differentiation (the US, Japan, Korea), the extent of use of online and other attenuated forms of tertiary provision, the existence of differential arrangements for funding or access to funded research, and the use of mechanisms of competition, which all else equal has stratifying effects. Unmediated competition exacerbates vertical distinctions between universities over time, as those with prior advantages tend to dominate successive contests. The effects accumulate.

We can distinguish the nations with comprehensive high school systems from the traditional German-influenced systems marked by firm streaming of the student population early in secondary school, between academic and vocational. More generally, there are differences between systems where for a long time all or nearly all students stayed till the end of secondary school and those in which for many students earlier exit was normal. In general there are trends to universal secondary participation and to postpone streaming to later in secondary education, but in the nations with a history of binary structures vestiges of the past persist.



Source: author

At the same time marketization cuts across these older differences. Hence the dynamics of massification differ in the non-marketized high participation Nordic world, the marketized high participation United States, and non-marketized non universal Germany. In the Nordic systems the emerging issue is how to pay for HPS of uniformly high quality as participation expands, given that even on those countries public revenues are not infinite. In the US the problem is the quality of community colleges, for-profits and the online sub-sector. In Germany it is to dismantle the informal cultural barriers and old segmenting habits that slow the roll-out of HPS.

In the context of HPS, government-driven marketization reforms such as competition for resources, user part-financing, and the use of business models and product formats, are not primarily designed to foster capitalist production per se. Though commercialization may be encouraged in selected areas such as biotechnology, or international education, states are not about to hand higher education and research to the corporate sector. These are strategically important sectors, and the public good element means that much of what they do cannot be rendered profitable anyway (Marginson, 2013). Rather, marketization reforms are designed to contain costs and drive efficiencies, while reducing the fiscal and political load on government. In the low tax polities of the English-speaking world, in which fiscal objectives are often dominant, only marketization has enabled states to move towards near universal provision. Thus since 1985 the UK, Australia and New Zealand have all increased student tuition charges in higher education in lock step with system expansion. The Post-Confucian systems have been able to move from elite higher education to high participation in relatively short time spans because of the long-standing willingness of families to invest. Marketization also helps states to manage unequal outcomes and legitimate stratification between institutions, while facilitating the retreat of states from direct economic responsibility for social outcomes in tertiary education.

At the same time, marketization emphasizes the provision of private benefits in tertiary education, while placing downward pressure on the common public good functions. Stratification weakens the sense of common benefit and shared experience. It is ironic that the notion of the common public good in higher education was stronger in mass systems with partial participation, than in universal systems that are now undergoing marketization as enrolments expand. Oddly, the emphasis on the private benefits of higher education has increased at the same time that the absolute value of those benefits has been falling. The relative advantage over non-graduates is maintained. But what happens to the idea of private benefit, which sustains the private investment that finances a growing part of HPS, when the category of non participants disappears, and participation no longer delivers clear-cut advantages?

Summation

*What has changed in the global era?*

What has changed in the era of communicative globalization? Globalization has indirectly increased the pressure on families and students to participate in tertiary education, by increasing the penalties attached to non-participation. Drop-outs from education are locked out of the primary labour circuits which are global in character. Perhaps, also, globalization encourages governments to pursue universal participation as a social project, in the face of social and economic fragmentation.

At the same time, and most importantly, globalization has been the vehicle of two developments with structural implications. First, as noted, global convergence and the development of a single networked system of research universities, has been the medium for the world movement to creation of World-class Universities (WCUs). It has not created elite institutions—every system has long had leading universities—but it has enhanced the role of institutional hierarchy and steepened the vertical divides. All else equal this enhances stratification within and between systems.

Second, global communications and the prestige of the top ranked universities sustains the development of Mass Open On-line Courseware (MOOCs). MOOCs are changing the character of mass education. They provide an attenuated experience of higher education, content rich but relationship poor. There is little contact with teaching and limited contact with fellow students via social networking. This means that the socialization and social capital benefits are low. At the same time MOOCs enable self-customization of the higher education experience, fitting closely with the way many students use the Internet. They are transformative of mass education both because they provide an important new option and because they are low cost. As both an alternative to conventional delivery (particularly in cross-border international education) and an adjunct to orthodox programs which save on staffing, MOOCs tend to radically reduce the costs of provision while reducing the value of the product.

Globalization is also the vehicle for patterns of cross-border policy imitation and borrowing which tend to quicken the growth of participation everywhere. Age-cohort participation rates at different levels are now one policy signifier of economic competitiveness. This is seen as an indicator of the breadth and depth of human capital, in the same way that the output of basic science in research university rankings is widely treated as an indicator of the capacity for industrial innovation.

*What is a high participation society?*

The trend to universal tertiary participation, like the trends to universal primary and secondary education, constitutes lifting the threshold of social and scientific literacy. All else being equal this is a significant step in the formation of active human agency, individual and collective. It brings into being a common tertiary-educated culture in which capacities to negotiate with government and corporations, and manage and express complex information, become the norm. One effect is to make states more transparent and accountable, lifting the performance threshold of officials. However, these benefits may be undercut if a significant proportion of participants are locked into low quality learning or marooned in learning experiences with attenuated sociability and communications, such as MOOCs (some, however, may argue that the social networking facilitated by some MOOCs is at least as meaningful as the communicative possibilities of on-site first degree education in many institutions).

At the same time, as participation advances towards universality the benefits associated with marginal provision must disappear. Universal aspirations through education coincide with widespread frustration and disappointment. This may even trigger a partial retreat from participation, as may be the case already in the United States. It becomes more apparent that middle and lower ranked institutions cannot by themselves deliver enough ‘bang’ in the labour markets. It is likely that new service industries will emerge, outside formal education, offering job placements for graduates. There are already signs of this in some countries.

*What will happen to higher education?*

What will happen to higher education? Trow rightly predicted the blurring of boundaries between higher education and other social sectors. He said that more students would work during semester and the campuses would become partly emptied out, undercutting the social outcomes of higher education. Declining student engagement is now apparent in many universities. The blurring of boundaries has long term implications for higher education. Organizations gain their rationale, legitimacy and identity from the distinction between themselves and other organizations (Considine, 2006). Here the key is the credentialing function. As long as even mass higher education institutions retain that function they have an assured future. Once they lose it the whole edifice below elite level starts to crumble.

Trow did not get it all right. Optimistic as he was about universal opportunity and mobility—and like many unable to grasp the positional goods factor—he missed the effects of the immiseration of the value of credentials in mass tertiary systems. Here a strange forking of the way between the value of credentials and the cost base, that spells trouble for many institutions in universal systems. On one hand the marginal value of credentials is shrinking to zero. On the other hand, governments are passing more of the cost of tertiary education back to student and families. In this context, the attractions of low cost alternatives such as MOOCs become stronger. Governments save money on the costs of supply. Students can access qualifications of a kind at a small fraction for the normal price. But low cost provision of non exclusive higher education that further attenuate the higher education experience tends to further drive down the average value of higher education. Mass institutions will try to differentiate themselves from each other via marketing but such strategies have a limited capacity to create positional value and hence a stable position of superiority.

We thus have an emerging binarism. On one hand the role of elite higher education institutions in national and world society is enhanced. On the other hand, mass education, in at least some countries, is in a state of growing crisis. Consider:

* There is a partial retreat from public funding, e.g. since 2008 in half of Europe and the public sector in the US. Tuition is unlikely to fully compensate. People will be reluctant to pay increasing amounts for education with declining firepower, though sat this stage they still need degrees;
* The status-forming function has long held ‘multi-versity’ institutions together, for example by combining research with teaching, but in mass educational institutions in HPS, degree value and status tend to decline. While MOOCs are accessible and attractive to users, they are weak in status-formation, despite the Ivy League brands;
* There are signs of the emptying out of collective student experience, given the absence from campus of working students, and the partial shift to online forms (but is this ‘participation’?)
* Amid the pluralization of institutional forms at the bottom end, how long can the credentialing role of mass education be sustained?

Yet we should be wary of generalizing. Not all the trends are apparent everywhere. Mass higher and tertiary education are more variable, and more vulnerable, in some countries than others. Further, if there is a general trend to enhancement of WCUs along with the weakening of mass education, to what extent are the two factors directly related? Arguably, it is possible to combine elite universities with a strong layer of lesser institutions. Perhaps the association is indirect and cultural in nature. Extolling WCUs encourages a greater tolerance of inequality and of market-driven outcomes. It also enables a greater tolerance for the matching of social inequalities and institutional stratification, though the association is not automatic.

Conclusions

What happens at boundary of participation/ non participation is important, but this is the beginning of an inquiry into HPS rather than the whole of it. We need to focus on differentiation of positional value, and on the character of different forms of participation, and monitor the effects of competition in HPS. We know much more about forms of stratification and trends in stratification, and about the character and differentiation of social demand, and about what is happening to social mobility in HPS. We also need to know what is happening at the border between higher education and other forms of learning and credentialing, especially the last. Sand we need to do comparative work to tease out the commonalities and differences.

The wild card might be the public good functions of higher education. Policy and regulation designed to control the extremes of stratification/binarism, and reassert integrating role of systems and the openness and equivalence of participation, make a difference. There is probably more difference between systems in their public good aspects, than in the tendencies to universal participation and WCUs. We need to know more about worldwide variations in both public good activity and market relations. This in turn can enable us to develop a richer picture of the meanings of HPS.

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[more to come]

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