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Education Leaders Gather in London to Imagine the New Global University

By Aisha Labi

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As the global economy emerges from crisis, internationalized higher education has a vital role to play as a force for change and recovery, representatives from universities and higher-education systems around the world heard at a conference here on Thursday.

"There are responsibilities, but also opportunities, for us all," Martin Davidson, chief executive of the British Council, told more than 1,200 delegates gathered for the conference, which is called Going Global and was organized by the council, Britain’s international organization for educational and cultural relations.

Simon Marginson of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, in Australia, outlined the broad context for the conference. "Higher education, ranging beyond the nation-state, is a central driver of globalization," he said, speaking at Thursday's opening session.

Beyond the 'Multiversity'

Research universities are among the most globally connected institutions in the world, Mr. Marginson said, and some have evolved into a new kind of model institution that he termed a "global research university." Such institutions go beyond the "multiversity," the model defined in the 1960s by Clark Kerr, then president of the University of California. That model, Mr. Marginson said, was a "university with multiple constituencies that did everything." The global research university, he said, "is the multiversity, plus more research, much more mobility, global systems, and ranking."

But this new paradigm for higher education also brings with it new sets of tensions, he said—for example, between mass teaching and a focus on conducting elite research, or between national and international perspectives. "Governments and some institutions are nationally blinkered," Mr. Marginson said, but global research institutions have "global visions and ambitions."
Mr. Marginson also reminded the audience that the global dominance of "the Anglo-American university" would not last. "As everyone knows, the East is rising," he said. That development may worry some, he added, but it "is a boon to those of us in the Asia-Pacific."

John E. Sexton, president of New York University, who also spoke at the opening session, alluded to a future international landscape with perhaps a dozen global "idea capitals," the "hydraulic" of which will be education and universities. He grounded his presentation with a specific example of how his institution is seeking to transform itself into a preeminent global university.

New York University's new outpost in Abu Dhabi is "not a branch campus," he said, but "an organically connected, second doorway" into the full NYU experience. Students can now select a continent as easily as they can a course, he said.

Models of Internationalization

The biggest challenge that universities face in expanding overseas is whether they can maintain quality, Mr. Sexton said. Different institutions will approach the challenge in different ways, he said.

In contrast to New York University's model of a networked system with its main engine still its New York base, he said, other institutions may depend on "their own magnetic quality" to draw people to their existing locations.

In between those two extremes, some institutions may opt to create loose exchanges, allowing the unregulated trading of students and faculty members, while others could forge alliances that allow students and faculty members to take advantage of international opportunities that their own institution might not offer. Each university will have to decide its own approach, Mr. Sexton said, warning that "failing to respond means that a response will be imposed upon you."

Other speakers at the opening session provided regional perspectives. Isak Froumin, an education specialist at the World Bank in Russia, is also overseeing internationalization efforts at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. That university's focus on creating strong partnerships with institutions in other countries, he said, provides "a good example of how globalization helps to build local capacity."

An Asian Difference
Gwang-Jo Kim, director of Unesco's Asia-Pacific bureau in Bangkok, said the pattern of student mobility in his region, where two-thirds of students leave to study elsewhere, provided a striking contrast to how globalization is progressing in Europe and North America. "Globalization should look into the regional dimension, and what it means to countries in the Asia-Pacific region," he said.

Xie Weihe, a vice president of Tsinghua University, in Beijing, questioned some of the existing indicators that are used to measure the internationalization of higher education. He noted that while China makes a great contribution to global higher education with the large numbers of students it sends out, it would also like to receive more students from abroad.

Leandro Tesser, a special adviser on internationalization to the president of the State University of Campinas in Brazil, said that in developing countries like his, global research universities do not offer solutions to the most pressing educational concerns. Internationalization and partnerships must also involve nonelite institutions, he said, even though every region of the world should also have the kind of global research universities that Mr. Marginson described.

At a session later in the day, speakers attempted to define the qualities of a truly global university. Ideas that emerged included an undergraduate curriculum structured to explicitly prepare students for a global world, a significant number of international students among the student population, and an international faculty.

The session also considered the hurdles facing universities as they globalize, however inevitable the process might be. Mr. Sexton, who also participated in that session, said the difficulty that worried him most was the danger of "provincialism." As people are forced out of their comfort zone, he said, there is bound to be resistance.

Institutions must put their focus on quality and not compromise excellence, he said. "It is very easy to become globalized badly."