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34. GLOBAL: PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL UNIVERSITY NETWORKS

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For centuries, higher education has been an internationally connected sector, as scholars have sought to exchange ideas and gain new knowledge. However, such connectivity appears to be reaching new heights, doubtless aided by the ability to connect physically and virtually, but not entirely explained by this. Kris Olds of the University of Wisconsin – Madison, discussing the “seemingly endless thicket of associations, networks, consortia and alliances,” argues that we are witnessing a process of denationalization as institutions reframe the scope of their vision, structures, and strategies beyond the national scale. Contrastingly, an analysis of key moments in internationalization from the late 19th to early 21st centuries finds approaches to internationalization to “denationalize” the university usually do not succeed (or not for long). So why are global networks proliferating and institutional efforts to reach out beyond national borders doomed to failure?

Collaborative historical research across Europe, Asia, Australia, and North and South America, undertaken by scholars within the Worldwide University Network, identifies the development of international consortia and networks as a response to major historical-structural changes in higher education. Universities have joined forces to meet new expectations and solve problems “on an ever-widening scale.” They have done this in the light of fluctuating enrollments and funding resources associated with economic booms and busts; new modes of transportation and communication facilitating mobility—among students, scholars, and knowledge itself; increasing demands for applied science, technical expertise, and commercial innovation; and ideological reconfigurations accompanying regime changes. These challenges still resonate as drivers for establishing global networks, but there are also new ones.

Competitive pressures are encouraging institutions and countries to seek competitive advantage through collaboration. The coveted goods of “global reputation” and “world-class status” lead toward rankings, positioning, branding, and reputation management. In the 21st century, when the power and influence of global media are ubiquitous, this driver may be stronger than in the past, supported and extended through new social and mobile technologies. Associating with others that are successful, well resourced, or powerful is assumed to bring added value, both

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in substance and reflected glory. Being invited to join an exclusive network—such as the League of European Research Universities or Universitas 21—signals mutual recognition and a perceived hallmark of quality in the global research hierarchy. For other institutions in search of global partners, factors beyond the “scholarship of discovery” are important signifiers of differentiation and distinctiveness in a crowded marketplace of networks.

DIVERSITY OF GLOBAL NETWORKS

Global networks are not just proliferating among institutions; they also cross sectors to engage new partners and leverage partnership assets to achieve benefits for businesses, citizens, and universities. “Triple helix” innovation systems are one example where traditionally separated innovation sources have come together—product development in industry, policymaking in government, and creation and dissemination of knowledge in academia—to facilitate development of new organizational designs, new knowledge, products, and services. A new bridge between Denmark and Sweden helped create the Oresund University Network, opening new research areas and educational possibilities. However, the original network of 11 universities has shrunk to those institutions that have been able to gain most advantage from that network. New forms of cultural engagement between Birmingham (UK) and Chicago involve multiple linkages between museums, theaters, art galleries, and universities, utilizing long-standing “Sister-City” relationships. Businesses also take the lead in establishing networks: Santander Bank created Santander Global Universities Division to support higher education as “a means of contributing to the development and prosperity of society.” There are now 1,000 university members in 17 countries and the bank has funded research, mobility, and scholarships. International associations have also facilitated global networks to pool resources, address pressing challenges, and contribute to the development of societies. The UNITWIN Networks and UNESCO Chairs—a program now involving 650 institutions in 24 countries—“serve as think tanks and bridge builders between academia, civil society, local communities, research, and policy-making.”

MULTIPLE THEMES

Institutions coalesce and cooperate in global networks across multiple themes to exchange information and good practice, benchmark their activities, create new knowledge through research and joint-degree programs, facilitate mobility of staff and students, optimize resources and increase capacity, and promote and advocate services and values. Thematic networks include UNICA (a network of 46 universities in 35 capital cities of Europe), UArctic (a cooperative network of universities, colleges, research institutes, and other organizations from 10 countries concerned with education and research in and about the north), UASNet (a network of

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universities of applied science from 9 countries represented by their national rectors' conferences) and the Asian Association of Open Universities focusing on distance learning. Shared values also drive global networks. With 320 institutional members in 72 countries, the Talloires Network is committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education; the International Sustainable Campus Network with 67 member institutions across five continents is committed to sustainability in campus operations and research and teaching; the global Scholars at Risk Network of institutions, academic associations, and associated networks advocates to protect academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and related higher education values.

SUSTAINABILITY

Some of today's global networks are new: some have lasted for decades; others have restructured, like the Oresund Network, and some have disappeared, like Scottish Knowledge, an e-learning consortium across 11 universities. Past experience offers some clue to sustainability—suggesting that where strategies either ignore or downplay cultural, political, or intellectual differences, failure will ensue—especially when the pursuit of new international connections is perceived to weaken national ties. A further lesson is that all partners must gain benefits from the network if trust, effort, and flow of institutional resources are to be maintained. Managing relationships respectfully and productively across international boundaries is likely to be a core competence for sustaining global networks.