

UNESCO
Forum on Higher Education, Research, and Knowledge
Global Colloquium on Research & Higher Education Policy

**Universities as Centers of Research and Knowledge Creation:
An Endangered Species?**
29 November - 1 December 2006, UNESCO, Paris

Background

The Forum's second international Colloquium will be a key global event bringing together researchers, policy-maker, experts and stakeholders from all parts of the world. The topic addresses the serious problems many universities in many parts of the world have in sustaining adequate programmes of research and enquiry. It considers both the reasons for, and the consequences of, a development that increasingly seems to limit many universities to being institutions of knowledge dissemination rather than knowledge creation. The topic also addresses the distribution of this phenomenon across different kinds of societies, political regimes, and levels of socio-economic development, and thus both allows for, and requires, a comparative approach.

The central premise for the Colloquium is that research is a key ingredient in the institutional identity of universities and an indispensable prerequisite for a successful program of teaching and public service. Universities that are deprived, or deprive themselves, of that ingredient risk the intellectual erosion of their programs of study, lose their critical ability to assess claims to knowledge, and become dependent on the outside supply of knowledge.

The principal question that the Colloquium will have to deal with is why these differences in research intensity and capacity exist among the world's universities, and what can be done to moderate and overcome them.

The role of research in higher education thus addresses a very serious and pertinent issue. It covers and connects the three main themes of the Forum: Universities, Research and Knowledge. The problem is particularly serious for developing countries, which is also an important consideration for the Forum.

The Issues

Universities in developing countries are under immense pressure to increase their enrolment in order to meet the human resource development targets of their respective countries. In addition, they are often forced to generate added revenue by increasing the number of fee-paying students. Teaching is therefore becoming their first priority and often their only pursuit. Also, because of scarce financial resources, they are unable adequately to equip and maintain their research facilities or replenish their libraries. In addition, they are unable to recruit or retain well-qualified faculty with strong research credentials who, for various reasons, prefer to move to developed countries (brain drain). In most developing countries universities are the main and often the only institutions to undertake research, and if these falter, knowledge production for the country as a whole will be seriously affected. Statistics show the very poor research output of many developing countries, and the most disadvantaged region is Sub-Saharan Africa. Other pertinent

issues include (a) how much of the research carried out in universities in developing countries is directly or indirectly relevant to the development needs of the country, and (b) how much of the findings gets effectively transmitted to the relevant users.

The issues in developed countries are slightly different. In those countries, there is a growing tendency to have different categories of universities – research-strong (generally the “old” universities) and “new” teaching-only universities. But is the term “university” at all appropriate for an institution which does not do any research? How important is research to teaching at the university level? Also, in many developed countries, research is increasingly being carried out in private, corporate organizations rather than at universities.

Issues common to all regions include: the privatization and commercialization of higher education, with serious and lasting effects on both the extent and the kind of research being undertaken; the increasing number of open universities with vastly different levels of attention to research; a growing trend of cross-border delivery of higher education with little or hardly any research focus; and the role of the state and other agencies in providing funding for research to universities.

The Colloquium Agenda

Against the background of these issues, the Colloquium will address a number of questions centered on the related issues of *research capacity*, *research productivity*, and *research utility*: research capacity is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for research productivity, and research productivity has to be assessed in terms of the utility of the research produced. The Colloquium therefore needs to seek answers to the question of what determines research capacity, research productivity, and research utility.

Research capacity is defined as the aggregate of the human, institutional, and financial conditions for pursuing research; research capacity is high when a university has competently trained researchers, institutional and governance arrangements that facilitate the setting of research agendas and the successful implementation of research projects, and the funding necessary to defray both the direct and the indirect cost of research.

Research productivity is the recognizable output of organized research and can be measured in the published record within a given field, the national and international visibility of individual researchers and research teams, the breadth as well as depth of an institution’s research program, and the number of new researchers being trained. Research productivity is a function of research capacity, but also is determined by the motivation and commitment of research staff, which in turn is influenced by incentives and the society’s overall system of rewards and social recognition. An institution can command adequate research capacity without being particularly productive of good research.

Research utility has to do with the quality of research from the perspective of a society’s or a region’s specific knowledge needs. Research that benefits primarily the knowledge needs of other societies needs to be questioned in terms of its utility. An important consideration in assessing research utility is where a country’s and an institution’s research agenda is set and determined: research is more likely to benefit a society’s knowledge needs if its objectives and priorities are determined in the country itself.

Research capacity, productivity, and utility are determined by factors both internal and external to the university. Among the *external factors* are

- the prevailing divisions of labor in the international knowledge and research system,
- the distribution of research capacity across different kinds of institutions within a country (universities, private research institutions, commercial companies, subsidiaries of foreign/international entities, etc.),
- the role of the state in supporting, controlling, legitimating, and using particular kinds of research,
- the sources of financial support for research, their volume and dependability as well as the conditions attached to them,
- legal and institutional arrangements hindering or facilitating the dissemination of research results,
- standards and mechanisms for monitoring the ethics of research,
- the role of, and the value attached to, foreign research training, and
- systems of incentives, rewards, and recognition for research and researchers (including the relative validation of the national and international recognition of research).

The **internal factors** affecting research capacity, productivity, and utility include

- systems of university governance in which research interests and research competence are or are not adequately represented,
- codes of academic recognition that do or do not reward significant research contributions,
- employment terms of research personnel,
- internal systems for the distribution of resources (including overheads, if any),
- linkages between university autonomy and research productivity and utility,
- programs of the recruitment, training, and support of new researchers,
- synergies among research domains within or across institutions, and
- arrangements for quality control in research.

Expected Outcomes

In the globalized society of the 21st century, equitable access to knowledge is an acknowledged factor for sustainable development, and thus for the eradication of poverty for nations of the developing world. In this respect, reference is made to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which orient national development policies of all nations. In this context, the Colloquium aims to provide :

.an up to date assessment of the situation facing universities - notably those in developing countries - as key places of knowledge generation and exchange

.practical suggestions for decision-makers in higher education and in domains related to sustainable development with a view to strengthening the role and impact of universities in assuring their principal functions which re crucial for the development process.