

University World News

New perspectives on 'Reinventing Higher Education'

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For the first time, the annual international conference on "Reinventing Higher Education" gave prominence to the rapidly transforming Arab world. Changes in the higher education landscape – driven by new technologies, shifting global forces and funding cuts – were other trends debated.

The event took place from 22-23 October at Madrid-based IE University, which is a private non-profit business owned by the *Instituto de Empresa SL*.

"The idea is to look at the university as a whole from all angles, and try to suggest reforms for the future, for the better," said Santiago Iñiguez, president of IE University and chair of the conference.

He pointed out that the Arab world comprises more than 400 million people in 22 countries and is experiencing profound transformation. It was significant, he said, that this change "is being supported by both public and private institutions, including individual philanthropists".

"Philanthropy has been increasing in the Arab world, as 40- to 50-year-olds who, for example, have been very successful bankers, saw that guys of 18 were willing to give their lives for change and then thought, 'What can I do?'" said Salah Khalil, director of the Alexandria Trust, which contributes to restoring world-class standards in education across the Arab region.

“Everyone was really excited about the Arab Spring but the reality of the situation is that we need an ‘Educational Spring’,” said Khalil.

“This is because ‘perverse institutionalism’ persists in the Arab world, whereby an organisation, whether it is a mosque or a university department, is set up to do something – and it does the exact opposite. Our biggest challenge is to create structures that can change this.”

Changes in the HE landscape

Change in the educational landscape was the topic of a separate panel debate in which Annie Lin, Wikipedia education programme manager, explained how the online encyclopedia is “turning the traditional educational system on its head by offering free access to the sum of human knowledge”.

The Wikimedia Foundation, which now has around 140 staff and operates in 20 countries, specifically seeks to support academics who, for example, assign students to write and edit contributions, translate texts or add pictures or video attachments to Wikipedia web pages.

“These students are learning new skills by working online with people from very different backgrounds, researching information, developing critical thinking, explaining technical jargon in simple terms and then on occasions having their work read by 50,000 people per day.

“So Wikipedia and higher education institutions have a lot to gain by working together,” she said.

New research illustrating global changes in education was presented by Pat Killingley, director of higher education at the British Council.

“There is going to be a movement of postdocs from West to East as economic powers such as China, for example, aim to have 500,000 foreign students in their country by 2020,” she said.

“Of the 37 new universities currently being built, 80% will be in Asia, and a quarter will be built by Asian universities themselves.

“Countries like China, Brazil and India restrict the involvement of foreign universities, and so if foreign institutions want to work there they will have to enter into partnerships.”

However, there are increasing opportunities for partnerships as developing countries are highly motivated to increase their universities’ positions in league tables by, for instance, publishing more research. “Forty-nine countries now publish 1,000 or more articles per year and that number of countries has risen by 30% in the last 15 years,” she said.

Funding cuts

How universities are coping in the context of government cuts in funding was another key topic of debate. Oxford University, for example, now charges £9,000 pounds (US\$14,300) in tuition fees per year but the actual cost of tuition is nearer £18,000.

“As we are 900 years old we are fortunate in receiving many endowments,” explained Roger Goodman, head of the social sciences division at Oxford. “Further income also comes from overseas students who pay full fees, research grants and our successful publishing branch, Oxford University Press.

“We are looking to earn much more funding from research in the future but we are only going to accept donations if they

help us do the work we want to do," he said.

At the other end of the spectrum is IBMEC, one of Brazil's newest private universities.

"We increased our tuition fees by 36.2%, from US\$833 per month in 2008 to US\$1,135 in 2010," explained Van Dyck Silveira, president of IBMEC. "We can do this because our degree holders are paid 171% better salaries than those who have just left high school."

"In fact the programmes generate a 72% average gross margin profit and no programme can produce less than a 35% profit for our shareholders," he said. "In a few years we plan to create an IPO [initial public offering] and instead of just paying for tuition our students will also be buying our stock."

Reflecting on the issues raised

IE President Santiago Iñiguez said the conference concluded two things from the session on financing.

"The first is that adjustments are taking place across the board from the US to Europe – and are particularly affecting countries like Spain – and the second is that universities can become more sustainable if they develop models based on diversification, covering programmes from undergraduate degrees up to executive education."

Regarding the impact of new technologies, Iñiguez highlighted the dramatic change in the role of professors. "They are now the catalysts of the whole learning process, and technologies can be a 'friend of the faculty' in this new environment," he said.

Radical changes are also taking place in the Arab world, Iñiguez argued, as from Morocco to the Gulf, in places like

Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, a large number of institutions are now supporting new initiatives.

“Entrepreneurship in higher education is very important and we need people who can reinvent universities like the Von Humboldts did in the 18th century,” he concluded.

“Who will be the Von Humboldts of the 21st century? Who will reinvent the financing, design our programme content and nurture the various forms of intelligence among our students?”