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HOW GLOBAL COMPETITION IS CHANGING UNIVERSITIES: Three Theoretical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an outline of three theoretical perspectives to study the impact of global competition on organizational change at universities. The perspective of neoliberal economics portrays global competition as competition of universities in the global higher education market. Universities transform towards greater efficiency with the goal of having a larger market share. The political economy perspective suggests that global competition in higher education is an emergent property of competitive relations among nation states. Universities change in the direction of increased prestige and status. Their transformation is a complex outcome of the interaction among global, national and local forces. The new institutionalist approach claims that global competition is a consequence of universities turning into organizational actors. Universities transform towards greater isomorphism with each other and with other organizational actors. The paper calls for more empirical international comparative studies in order to understand strengths and limitations of each perspective. It suggests a hypothesis that the explanatory power of each perspective is contingent upon the state steering model in a particular country.

Keywords: Global Competition, Organizational Change, Neoliberal Economics, Political Economy, New Institutionalism.

Global competition in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon, associated with the development of the worldwide "knowledge economy" and the impact of globalization (Marginson, 2006, 2010a; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Portnoi, Bagley, & Rust, 2010; Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; Naidoo, 2011; Bagley & Portnoi, 2014). Global competition is fueled by the idea of the "world-class university" (Salmi, 2009; Altbach & Salmi, 2011), supported by international organizations like the World Bank and the OECD (van der Wende, 2011), and now manifested in global rankings of universities that first appeared in the early part of this century (Hazelkorn, 2014a). As a result, more and more universities define themselves in global competitive terms.

The strategic vision of the University of Manchester (UK), for example, is to become one the top 25 research universities in the world by 2020 ("Manchester 2020. The Strategic Plan for The University of Manchester," 2011). Many other universities have similar ambitious plans; most are pursuing organizational and management reforms to help boost their rankings and perceived prestige. Prestige hungry universities seek enrollment strategies, and faculty recruitment and promotion procedures, seek research capacity-building and excellence initiatives, and regionalization and international cooperation that are different than in the past (Bagley & Portnoi, 2014; Rust & Kim, 2012). They are becoming or want to become, in one form or another, transformed institutions. Adding the pressure to improve their rankings, national ministries and other university stakeholders also evaluate the quality and performance of their national leading universities through the prism of rankings that focus largely on research productivity and citation analysis.

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This essay provides a framework for analyzing the interplay of globalization and universities, and specifically how this relatively new sense of global competition is influencing and shaping the management of a growing number of universities.

The notion of global competition is closely associated with neoliberal ideology and values that have informed thinking in a number of policy arenas, including higher education (Naidoo, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Despite a number of recent studies focused specifically on global competition in higher education (most notably (Marginson, 2006; Rust, Portnoi, & Bagley, 2010; Bagley & Portnoi, 2014)) there is no consensus among researchers on how best to conceptualize this phenomenon and its impact on universities. The lack of coherent theoretical language creates barriers for empirical work and limits our understanding of the consequences of global competition.

The following outlines three perspectives or conceptual lenses to study global competition in higher education and its impact on organizational transformations at universities. The neoliberal perspective views global competition as a competition of universities in the global higher education market. The political economy perspective portrays global competition in higher education as an emergent property of competition among nation states. The new institutionalist perspective describes global competition as a consequence of the global process when universities turn into organizational actors.

Each perspective originates from the existing literature and policy discussions and provides a distinct definition of the global competition phenomenon as well as a general explanation of its impact on organizational change at universities. A number of studies often rely on a combination (explicit or implicit) of these perspectives. However, in order to advance the understanding of the effects of global competition, it is important to distill the arguments of different theoretical approaches.

1. NEOLIBERAL PERSPECTIVE: Global Competition in a Global Higher Education Market

One of the most common ways to describe global competition is to apply neoliberal imagery to higher education. Since the 1980s, the notions of marketization and commodification of higher education started to dominate policy discussions around the world. As noted in a World Bank report in 1998: "The reform agenda of the [19]90s, and extending well into the next century, is oriented to the market rather than to public ownership or to governmental planning and regulation. Underlying the market orientation of tertiary education is the ascendance, almost worldwide, of market capitalism and the principles of neo-liberal economics" (Johnstone, 1998, p. 3).

Neoliberal principles both inform policy-making in higher education and provide a coherent conceptual framework to describe the higher education sector as a capitalist market (Johnstone, 1998; Levidow, 2002; Marginson, 2012). First, higher education is viewed as a commodity produced by universities and other types of institutions that compete in the free market with limited to no government interference. Second, most of the relationships between students, faculty, state, etc. are redefined in business terms: teaching as selling, learning as buying, running a university as increasing market share and making a profit, etc. Quality, accountability and efficiency of higher education institutions are described in accountancy terms. Third, the power in decision-making in higher education shifts from governments and higher education institutions to consumers or clients – students and businesses.

Since all capitalist markets are global in scale (at least in theory), universities are expected to compete in the global higher education market. As marketization progresses, such universities operate similar to multi-national corporations in retail, IT or pharmaceutical sectors. Not all universities, of course, participate in global competition but only those that have a global capacity – "world-class universities" (Salmi, 2009) or, at least, aspiring "world-class universities" (Altbach & Balán, 2007; Altbach & Salmi, 2011). While the concept of a world-class university is vague (Altbach, 2004), it fits very well into the neoliberal discourse in higher education. Jamil Salmi, the former World Bank Tertiary Education Coordinator, defines distinctive characteristics of "world-class universities" using economic terms: "They *produce* well-qualified graduates who are in *high demand* on the labor *market*; they conduct leading-edge research published in *top* scientific journals; and in the case of science-and-technology–oriented institutions, they *contribute to technical innovations* through *patents and licenses*" (Salmi, 2009, p. 5). The three major factors – talents, resources and governance – that, according to Salmi, contribute to the development of world-class universities, all emphasize the importance of free market forces. Top universities should win the global competition for students and faculty in order to concentrate talent. They also compete for abundant resources to cover the significant costs of running a research-intensive university. Finally, world-class universities do better in competitive environments with minimal interference from the government.

Several important developments reinforce the neoliberal idea of a global higher education market. Globalization has led to an increase in cross-border mobility flows, both among students and faculty. A number of universities, especially in the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom earn profits by charging international students higher fees, establishing

branch campuses and franchised degree programs (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The rise of global rankings of universities has supported and framed the idea of global competition between higher education institutions (Hazelkorn, 2014b; Portnoi et al., 2010). Rankings construct and translate a universal idea of global excellence that could be achieved by universities all over the world (Enders, 2012). In addition, rankings put emphasis on inter-institutional comparisons and objectify competition between universities as organizational actors.

The neoliberal perspective suggests that global competition transforms universities the same way it transforms organizations from other sectors of the economy. In order to gain competitive advantage, universities focus on expanding their market share in talented students and faculty, in research funding and outputs like patents, engage in profit-oriented activities, and eliminate inefficiencies. The worldwide movement of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) redefines core activities such as teaching and research in market terms and stimulates universities to create certain infrastructure around them. Higher education institutions borrow solutions and "best practices" from the business sector (strategic management, total quality management, branding, etc.) to increase institutional efficiency.

2. POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVE: Global Competition as an Emergent Property of Competitive Relations Among Nations

Another influential conceptualization of global competition in higher education emphasizes the role of competitive relations among nation states in the global knowledge economy (Carnoy et al., 2013; Douglass, 2008; Marginson, 2006; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Scott, 2011). Research universities are seen as part of the larger effort to increase countries' global competitiveness and advance technological innovations. Global aspirations and strategies of a particular higher education institution are highly dependent on national policy agendas and goals of local and regional authorities. Universities participate in global competition as agents of the state rather than independent organizations; their success or failure is contingent upon a country's position in the global knowledge economy and global hierarchy of nations (Marginson, 2006).

Proponents of the political economy perspective argue that the neoliberal description of global competition in higher education is vulnerable to several important criticisms. First, despite more than two decades of neoliberal reforms in higher education, there is limited evidence that universities operate within the environment of capitalist markets (Marginson, 2010b, 2012). Even at the level of national systems of higher education, market mechanisms and incentives are limited by the public good nature of knowledge and political interference by the state (Marginson, 2012; Naidoo, 2008).

Second, the level of global engagement in higher education is often overestimated: most universities depend more on their national and local contexts (Scott, 2011). The relationships among local, national and global dimensions in higher education are much more complex than neoliberal imagery of global higher education market suggests (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). The ideal model of flagship university (Douglass, 2015) is a more relevant reference point in this context than the globalized world-class university model. Third, global competition in higher education is vectored by international competition within the global knowledge economy (Marginson, 2010a; Naidoo, 2011) and influenced by the concentration of high-tech innovation and research capacity, unequally distributed among countries (Carnoy et al., 2013; Douglass, 2008).

Simon Marginson, in a series of publications (Marginson, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), presents the most comprehensive theory of global competition in higher education within the political economy perspective. Following Hirsch (Hirsch, 1976), Marginson argues that higher education is a "positional good" that provides better opportunities and prestige to its holders by denying them to others. The nature of positional goods implies that universities operate in a winner-takes-all market where elite institutions provide a limited number of prestigious degrees. Positional competition leads to a specific vertical segmentation of the higher education market with different laws of competition in different sectors.

The top segment of global competition includes the "world market of elite universities" with US research-intensive universities and prestigious UK universities (Marginson, 2006, p. 21). This segment is driven by prestige rather than profits and includes universities that provide degrees of the highest positional value. It subordinates the other four segments: (1) "exporting national research universities", (2) "teaching focused export institutions", (3) "nationally-bound research universities" and (4) "lesser status national/local institutions". Marginson argues that the distribution of universities within these segments is influenced by the global hierarchy of nations. There are three major factors that contribute to the global hierarchy of nations: the distribution of research capacity between higher education systems, the global advantage of English, and global dominance of the US in higher education (Marginson, 2006, pp. 24–27).

The knowledge economy became the forefront of international competition as many countries view high-tech industries as contributing to long-term economic competitiveness (Douglass, 2008). A number of governments invest significant resources and create favorable institutional environments to stimulate growth in innovations. However, the distribution of research capacity is highly unequal. Research universities from the United States and English-speaking countries dominate rankings by research output and attract the most talented students and scholars. The system of status production created around knowledge flows tends to favor English-speaking countries, most notably the US, that have the largest share in the knowledge economy (Marginson, 2010a). The mobility of universities between these segments is limited by the nature of positional markets structured as a zero-sum game. As Marginson puts it, "At its peak global competition *is* American competition, and vice versa" (Marginson, 2006, p. 27). The success of American research universities and the American economy has led to a situation in which particular forms of knowledge production and institutional organization have become the gold standard in higher education. Hence there have been more and more efforts to establish new Harvards and Stanfords (or at least to become more like them) outside the US.

How does global competition affect the organizational transformation of universities according to the political economy perspective? Most importantly, this approach emphasizes the crucial role of the interplay among global, national and local dimensions of higher education and the ways they transform and shape higher education institutions. The "glonacal agency" heuristic (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) conceptualizes complex patterns of activities and groups involved in higher education: global agencies, global human agency, national agencies, national human agency, local agencies, and local human agency.

Organizational structures and policies at universities are shaped by the pressures and mutual flows of influence of these forces. For instance, in an exemplary 'glonacal' study, Marginson (Marginson, 2013) analyzes variations in the movement to establish a world-class university and the interplay between global, national and institutional policies in this process. He argues that the difference in the development of world-class universities world-wide lies in the role of the nation-state in higher education and that its nature needs to be unpacked in further studies.

3. NEW INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE: Global Competition and Universities as Organizational Actors

The third theoretical perspective on global competition draws on the ideas of new institutionalism and, more specifically, world polity theory (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The emphasis on global competition in higher education is increasing because universities transform "from historically grounded and nationally specific institutions to organizational actors influenced by universalistic rationalizing models" (Ramirez, 2010, p. 43). Universities as organizational actors have goals, develop strategic plans to attain them and see other universities and organizations as elements of their competitive environment (Krücken & Meier, 2006).

Rationalization is a universal process that promotes changes in all spheres of society, including higher education. Rationalized institutional structures or myths (e.g. procedures for personnel selection, principles of strategic management) make formal organizations more common and more elaborate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, corporations, hospitals, NGOs, etc. should incorporate these institutional myths into their structures to avoid illegitimacy even in cases when such myths do not lead to more efficiency.

Universities are not an exception. In the last 50 years, the higher education sector has seen a tremendous growth in rationalized myths that are universal not only across different countries but also across different sectors. Institutional pressures of the wider environment in higher education include greater accountability, quality assurance, strategic development, financial sustainability, engagement in entrepreneurial activities, etc. These pressures have made universities more isomorphic, with the myths of an institutional environment and other organizational actors with globally convergent structures.

Krücken and Meier (2006) suggest that the process of turning the university into an organizational actor – integrated and goal-oriented entity – has become one of the most significant global trends in higher education. They argue that a "generalized script" for organizational actorhood is diffusing globally through mutual observation and imitation among individual universities.

Krücken and Meier (2006) identified four key elements of organizational actorhood of universities: organizational accountability; the tendency toward defining organizational goals through mission statements; the ongoing elaboration and expansion of formal technical structures around these goals; and the transformation of university management into a profession (p. 243).
One characteristic of universities as organizational actors is their ability to identify their competitors and develop structures and strategies to deal with the competition. Organizational actors aspire to achieve excellence defined in relation to other organizational actors and global in scale. Global rankings and international student flows structure this global competitive environment for universities. Universities act as if they can learn from those who win the competition and improve their operations based on the "best practices" and benchmarking.

The success of US universities in global competition could be explained by the fact that they became organizational actors much earlier than universities in other parts of the world (Ramirez, 2010). Universities in developing countries move in the same direction but with greater internal resistance.

4. CONCLUSION

The following figure summarizes the major ideas and concepts of all three theoretical perspectives. Each of them provides a unique angle on the impact of global competition on universities worldwide. The first – neoliberal – perspective suggests that universities transform towards greater efficiency. The most "efficient" universities have a larger market share in the global higher education market.

The second perspective expects that universities will change in the direction of increased prestige and status. But this transformation is a complex outcome of the interaction among global, national and local forces. The strength of the national knowledge system, global competition and hierarchy of nations are among the important factors that affect the development of universities.

Finally, the third perspective provides a completely different view in which universities adopt the global model of organizational actors and hence become isomorphic to each other and to other organizational actors. Global competition is the consequence of such a transformation that is affected by the universal process of rationalization.

Table 1. Three Theoretical Perspectives on the Impact of Global Competition on Universities

	Neo-Liberal - Competition of universities in the global market	**Political Economy - Emergent property of competition between the nation states**	**New Institutionalism - Consequence of universities turning into organizational actors**
Competitors	Research universities	National knowledge systems	Universities as organizational actors
Competition space	Global higher education market	Positional, hierarchical, winner-takes-all market	World society
Origin of rules	Perfect market competition	Status production systems establishing the "global hierarchy of nations"	Rationalization
Driving forces of organizational change at universities	Market forces and strategic responses to them	Global, national, local agencies and collective human actions	The need for legitimacy, logic of compliance
Expected direction of organizational change at universities	Increased efficiency	Increased prestige/status	Global model of organizational actor and increased isomorphism
Central concepts	World-class university, global rankings	Knowledge economy, Glonacal agency	Organizational actorhood, isomorphism
Theoretical roots	Neoliberal economics	International political economy, Institutional economics	New institutionalism in sociology, World polity theory

It is unclear, however, which of the three perspectives better explains structural and managerial transformation at universities under the influence of globalization. More comparative international research studies are needed in order to understand their limitations and strengths in different contexts. These studies could address the impact of global rankings and global excellence initiatives on higher education institutions, competition for international students and faculty, among other topics.

The comparison of the assumptions behind these perspectives allows me to suggest a hypothesis for future empirical studies. The accuracy of the explanations by each of the three perspectives is contingent upon the steering model used in the higher education system of a particular country. According to Gornitzka and Maassen's (2000) classification there are four state steering models in higher education: (1) *the sovereign, rationality-bounded steering model* where the state directly controls development

of higher education institutions, (2) *the institutional steering model* where universities and colleges have institutional power to protect their autonomy, (3) *the corporate-pluralist steering model*, when there are several competing and legitimate centers of authority in higher education, and (4) *the supermarket steering model*, when the role of the state is limited. It can be assumed that the neoliberal perspective will better explain transformations in the countries with the supermarket steering model. Political economy perspective could provide a better understanding of the changes of universities functioning under the sovereign or the corporate-pluralist steering models. And new institutionalist perspective could give more insights in the context of the institutional steering model.

Gornitzka and Maassen (2000) argue that despite the visible shift towards the supermarket model in the Western Europe most higher education systems adopt a hybrid steering approach and combine various elements from each model. This means that a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains the impact of global competition on universities should also incorporate ideas from each of the three theoretical perspectives outlined in this essay.

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