

VC-NET

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A Canadian trend of growth despite fewer resources

The latest study to emerge from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada looks at the comparative funding of Canadian higher education compared with the USA, the UK and Australia and also studies some trends in staffing. There are some interesting findings:

- FTE student numbers have grown by 56 percent in the last 20 years but staff numbers grew by only 18 percent. This is about the same overall picture as in Australia where student numbers were up by 41 percent and staff numbers by only 10 percent. However, in USA the growth in FTE students and staff was identical, while in the UK it was almost matching at 25 percent and 20 percent respectively.
- The funding gap per student with the USA is growing and the study claims that US public universities have C\$8,000 more per student annually than Canadian public universities.
- Overall funding per student in Canada, Australia and the UK in 2006 was very similar at around C\$20,000, although the UK's figure will have increased since then due to student fee increases.
- Funding for research in universities has doubled in ten years from C\$1.2bn in 1996-97 to C\$2.4bn in 2006-07. The Canada Research Chairs Program has supported more than 1,850 research chairs and 584 of these have attracted leading international researchers to Canada. A new federal program of Global Excellence Research Chairs will give up to C\$10 million to each Chair over a seven year period.
- There is a rising demand for PhD holders from Canadian employers and almost half of this is now being met by immigrants who have earned their PhDs abroad (50 percent from Asia). The number of international PhD students who stay on and seek work in Canada is falling and this is narrowing the domestic recruitment pool, forcing employers to look overseas.

The general theme of the AUCC report is to emphasise the inter-relationship between funding of teaching and funding of research and to highlight the fact that in all the four countries under examination universities are seen as "key contributors to social and economic well-being". It is an interesting feature of our times that almost every higher education policy paper now includes comparative analyses of competitor countries.

Source: See http://www.aucc.ca/pdf/english/publications/trends_2008_vol3_e.pdf

UK joins the hunt for post doctoral talent in social sciences, engineering and the humanities

In early June the UK announced a programme of fellowships for post doctoral researchers in the natural and social sciences, engineering and the humanities. 50 Newton Fellowships will be awarded each year with funding up to GBP 32,000 per annum for a two year period. An unusual bonus is the 10-year follow-up funding worth GBP 6,000 per annum, which is aimed at contributing towards the cost of networking (and presumably visiting) the UK. This is available for all Newton Fellow who remain in research. The award makes the assumption that all researchers will return to their home country, thus avoiding a charge of encouraging the brain drain. This is not always stated explicitly in similar programmes run by other countries, which assume (and hope) that a significant proportion of PhD researchers will stay on and contribute to their host country's economy.

The Newton Fellowships therefore join Australia's Endeavour Awards and Canada's Vanier Scholarships Program on the growing menu of options for enterprising young researchers looking for overseas experience.

Sources: Newton details are at www.newtonfellowships.org while the full range of Endeavour Awards is described at http://www.endeavour.deewr.gov.au/summary_awards/ . The Vanier Scholarships have only recently been announced and broad details are at: <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2008/02/26/budget-2008-new-grad-scholarships-aim-to-attract-international-talent/>

Indian review of UGC and AICTE

International observers of Indian higher education have often been confused by the numbers of regulatory bodies exercising (or seeking to exercise) control over higher education institutions. This may now change, since the Ministry of Human Resource Development has commissioned a review of the two main bodies – the UGC which regulates universities and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) which regulates providers of technical education. The brief of the reviewers, who must report by March 2009, is to examine the legislative frameworks and suggestions for changing them; they then must “critically assess the preparedness of the two bodies “to provide institutional leadership to the emerging demands of access, equity, relevance and quality of the system”. The last two elements of the brief are particularly topical in view of the statement by NASSCOM, the body that speaks for India's software industry, that only 30% of current graduates are employable. The Committee will also look at the respective autonomy of the UGC in relation to central government and the universities in respect of the UGC.

In a delightful turn of phrase the UGC has started the consultation process by asking the public “What are the impediments or irritations you encounter in your interaction with the UGC or AICTE?” How many other regulators dare ask the same question?

Sources: The Economic Times, 10 March 2008. Terms of reference and minutes of the first two Review Committee meetings are on the University Grants Commission website at <http://www.ugc.ac.in/aictereview/ugcaicte.html>

Some farewell reflections from John Fielden

As this is the last issue of VC Net that I will write after a run of over seven years, my long suffering editor has allowed me to pass on some personal reflections on the developments that I have seen since 2001. It has been a period of very significant change:

- In 2001 the concept of competitor countries had barely emerged. Policy papers for ministers did not always look at what other countries were doing (as with the Canadian document described above). There is now a regular game of catch-up being played on issues related to the knowledge economy, such as funding of research infrastructure, softening visa regulations to retain PhDs, creation of research chairs and fellowships and increasing the levels of funding for research.

- The impact of globalisation and the internet on higher education policy means that there is a greater exchange of policies and programme ideas between countries. Civil servants in most countries have learned to use the internet and the web – as there was a time when they were well behind academia.
- Politicians are more hyperactive and prone to policy reviews. Funding models are particularly prone to revision or change, as the story of the search for the perfect research assessment and funding model shows.
- One consequence of a more active ministry is that buffer bodies, where they exist, are increasingly at risk, as ministries intervene more in the detailed intervention of policy. In Pakistan the solution has been to give the Chairman of the Higher Education Commission the status of a federal minister.
- The private sector is becoming much more active and visible in all aspects of higher education provision and support and this is not just limited to those countries where the state sector is unable to afford the cost of increasing access. Even the UK has given private colleges degree awarding powers.
- Finally, we do seem to have accepted that those managing universities require leadership skills as well as academic credibility and sensitivity. There are now three agencies in the Commonwealth dedicated to strengthening the quality of institutional managers (in Malaysia, Australia and the UK).

In 2008 the higher education scene is immeasurably more diverse and challenging than it was in 2001. Governments expect more and regulate more, while in most cases offering less funding (except, as we have seen, for strategic research). The need for talented leaders has never been greater.

The editor, Jay Kubler is always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. She can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.