OECD   Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society
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Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society

The growing focus on tertiary education

(   ) Tertiary education policy is increasingly important on national agendas. The
widespread recognition that tertiary education is a major driver of economic
competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy has made highquality
tertiary education more important than ever before. The imperative for countries is
to raise higher-level employment skills, to sustain a globally competitive research base
and to improve knowledge dissemination to the benefit of society.

(   ) Tertiary education contributes to social and economic development through four
major missions:

    The formation of human capital (primarily through teaching);

    The building of knowledge bases (primarily through research and knowledge
    development);

    The dissemination and use of knowledge (primarily through interactions with
    knowledge users); and

    The maintenance of knowledge (inter-generational storage and transmission of
    knowledge).

(   ) The scope and importance of tertiary education have changed significantly. Over
40 years ago tertiary education, which was more commonly referred to as higher
education, was what happened in universities. This largely covered teaching and learning
requiring high level conceptual and intellectual skills in the humanities, sciences and
social sciences, the preparation of students for entry to a limited number of professions
such as medicine, engineering and law, and disinterested advanced research and
scholarship. These days, tertiary education is much more diversified and encompasses
new types of institutions such as polytechnics, university colleges, or technological
institutes. These have been created for a number of reasons: to develop a closer
relationship between tertiary education and the external world, including greater
responsiveness to labour market needs; to enhance social and geographical access to

tertiary education; to provide high-level occupational preparation in a more applied and less theoretical way; and to accommodate the growing diversity of qualifications and expectations of school graduates.

(   ) As participation in tertiary education has expanded, tertiary education institutions (TEIs) have assumed responsibility for a far wider range of occupational preparation than in the past. As the result of a combination of the increased knowledge base of many occupations and individual's aspirations, not only doctors, engineers and lawyers but also nurses, accountants, computer programmers, teachers, pharmacists, speech therapists, and business managers now receive their principal occupational qualifications from a TEI. Furthermore, TEIs are now involved in a wider range of teaching than their traditional degree-level courses. While the extent of such teaching is not large, many examples can be found of TEIs that offer adult education and leisure courses, upper secondary courses to prepare students for tertiary-level study, and short specific occupational preparation at sub-degree level. In addition, it has become more common for TEIs not only to engage in teaching and research, but also to provide consultancy services to industry and government and to contribute to national and regional economic and social development.

(   ) Substantial reforms are taking place in tertiary education systems mainly aimed at encouraging institutions to be more responsive to the needs of society and the economy. This has involved a reappraisal of the purposes of tertiary education and the setting by governments of new strategies for the future. It has also involved more room of manoeuvre for institutions but with clearer accountability for the institutions to society. The tertiary sector is expected to contribute to equity, ensure quality and operate efficiently.

Main trends within tertiary education

Although not all countries are in the same position, a number of trends within tertiary education emerge.

(   ) *Expansion of tertiary education systems*

The expansion of tertiary education has been remarkable in recent decades. Globally, in 2004, 132 million students enrolled in tertiary education, up from 68 million in 1991. Average annual growth in tertiary enrolment over the period 1991-2004 stood at 5.1% worldwide.

(   ) *Diversification of provision*

Expansion of tertiary education was accompanied by a diversification of provision. New institution types emerged, educational offerings within institutions multiplied, private provision expanded, and new modes of delivery were introduced.

(   ) *More heterogeneous student bodies*

The rise of female participation has been the most noteworthy trend affecting the composition of student bodies in tertiary education. A second prominent development is the growing participation of more mature students leading to a rise in the average age of student bodies. In addition, in most countries, tertiary student bodies are increasingly heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity and previous education.

(   ) *New funding arrangements*

A number of trends are also discernible in funding arrangements for tertiary education. First, there has been a diversification of funding sources. Second, the allocation of public funding for tertiary education is increasingly characterised by greater targeting of resources, performance-based funding, and competitive procedures. Third, a number of countries are expanding their student support systems.

(   ) *Increasing focus on accountability and performance*

The development of formal quality assurance systems is one of the most significant trends that have affected tertiary education systems during the past few decades. Starting in the early 1980s quality became a key topic in tertiary education policy. The expansion of tertiary education has raised questions about the amount and direction of public expenditure for tertiary education. In addition to fiscal constraints, increased market pressures have also fostered the growing focus on accountability in tertiary education.

(   ) *New forms of institutional governance*

Over the past few decades important changes have occurred in the leadership of tertiary education institutions, including the emergence of new perspectives on academic leadership and new ways of organising the decision-making structure. Academic leaders are increasingly seen as managers, coalition-builders or entrepreneurs.

(   ) *Global networking, mobility and collaboration*

Tertiary education is becoming more internationalised and increasingly involves intensive networking among institutions, scholars, students and with other actors such as industry. International collaborative research has been strengthened by the dense networking between institutions and cross-border funding of research activities.

Main policy challenges

(   ) In the governance of tertiary education, the ultimate objective of educational authorities as the guardians of public interest is to ensure that public resources are efficiently spent by TEIs to societal purposes. There is the expectation that institutions are to contribute to the economic and social goals of countries. This is a mixture of many

demands, such as: quality of teaching and learning defined in new ways including greater relevance to learner and labour market needs; research and development feeding into business and community development; contributing to internationalisation and international competitiveness.

(　　) There is a tension between the pursuit of knowledge generation as a self-determined institutional objective and the statement of national priority as defined in the aims and goals of the tertiary system. The objective, from a governance point of view, is then to reconcile the priorities of the individual institutions and the broader social and economic objectives of countries. This entails determining how far the former contributes to the latter as well as clarifying the degree of latitude the institution has in pursuing its own self-established objectives. The main policy challenges are listed in Table 1. Most countries face the challenge of simultaneously raising tertiary education participation rates, improving quality and achieving a sustainable level of financial support. Many countries are also now in a transition from a focus on quantity to a greater emphasis on the quality, coherence, and equity of tertiary education.

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