



How university global partnerships may facilitate a new era of international affairs and foster political and economic relations[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A new paradigm of structured international university relationships is emerging as shaped by a new era of government and industry intervention in association with knowledge. It is driven not only by political and economic interests, but also by an increased perception of the growing perceived evidence of the potential benefits resulting from the economic appropriation of the results and methods of science by the society.

This paper builds on the Triple Helix of university–industry–government relations and shows that structured international relationships may act as agents of change if associated with activities that are fundamentally different from the traditional role of universities, involving, most of the times, capacity building and various forms of social and economic appropriation of knowledge. They also require understanding the nature of international cooperation beyond the exporting/importing of “academic services” in all the institutions involved. In addition, they clearly break traditional boundaries of “national systems of innovation” and bring new challenges in terms of the necessary institutional integrity that universities need to preserve and foster.

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1. Introduction

I argue in this paper that our societies are entering critical times that require the creation of conditions able to strengthen institutions fostering change through knowledge-based international cooperation. This is well beyond the boundaries of “national systems of innovation” and requires people trained to act in quite diversified and global environments. Universities may play that role if their internationalization and specialization path is understood as a key element in a new era of international affairs, where governments and industry intervene through knowledge.

It should be noted that it has become a common place to argue in favor of the internationalization of universities (Knight, 2004; Johnstone et al., 2010) and this includes the need to

promote student mobility (Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011), to foster attractive and competitive research environments (Capaldi, 2010) and to attract and train highly qualified human resources (Vest, 2007). It is also clear that the concept of universities includes the international dimension since their establishment as institutions of higher education and research (since “universe” is fundamental to their identity (Knight, 2010)). Furthermore, the mobility of students and scholars has been a central feature of higher education for centuries. But the key emerging issues to understand is why universities need to go international and promote international agendas of teaching and research? And, why governments need to fund universities beyond national borders?

Two main aspects should be clarified before any attempt to address these questions. First, the specialized literature has been clear in differentiating the terms “internationalization” and “globalization” of academic institutions (Knight, 2004; Huisman and van der Wende, 2005; Altbach and Knight, 2007), although the two concepts are too often confused with each other (Altbach, 2004). Specifically, internationalization of

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higher education has been described as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions and the delivery of higher education” (Knigh, 2010; OECD, 2008). It refers to an increased activity of universities across borders with the persistence of a national or local identity. On the other hand, globalization has been described as a process that is increasingly associated with the flow of people, cultures, ideas, values and economy across borders, resulting in a more interconnected and interdependent world. It implies that national borders are softened, or even disappear (Teichler, 2004). Under this context, the emerging orientation worldwide towards the internationalization of academic institutions has been associated with the economic, political and social changes pushed by the increasingly globalized society we live in (Altbach and Knight, 2007; OECD, 2008).

Second, clarifying the concepts of “cooperation” and “competition” among universities is also necessary when considering higher education internationalization. This is because internationalization primarily deals with academic cooperation, individuals’ mobility and knowledge transfer (Marginson et al, 2002; Altbach and Knight, 2007). On the contrary, globalization is often associated with university competition and market steering (El-Khawass, 1994; Lenn, 1999; Sadlak, 2001). In particular, the specialized literature commonly refers to internationalization when focuses on cooperating ventures of academic institutions in continental Europe, while globalization has been often associated with competition among English-speaking countries (Luijten-Lub et al., 2005) and the rise of the “American Research University” model worldwide (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 1996).

It is in this context that this paper considers the international collaboration between universities, in a process where its systematic interaction with governments and industry cross borders is giving rise to a new paradigm of higher education internationalization. The university is identified as the crucial player in such dynamics, being a privileged locus wherein developing international relationships with other academic institutions, government and industry. It involves, most of the times, triple relations with a strong international dimension.

It should be noted that several authors have already discussed the benefits arising from such relationships, theorizing the so-called “Triple Helix” of university–industry–government relations, and suggested “the university can play an enhanced role in innovation in increasingly knowledge-based societies” (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 1996; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000a). A leading example of the evidence initially used to develop that model at an international level was introduced by Leydesdorff and Sun (2009) when investigating Japan. This paper builds on that idea and extends its potential impact to facilitate a new era of international affairs, where universities are becoming key players to foster political and economic relations. Although the “Triple Helix Model” is too often addressed in association to co-authorship of scientific publications (Leydesdorff and Meyer, 2007), we consider as well this theoretical framework in the present paper because it directly deals with the interplay of universities, governments and industry towards innovative societies. It should also be noted that Leydesdorff and Meyer (2007) explicitly argue that institutional arrangements in a knowledge-based economy may be considered as support structures for cognitive

developments. In addition, those relations can be considered as a “foreign” dimension to national innovation systems (Leydesdorff, 2012). Moreover said, “national systems” have been commonly discussed in the literature as a necessary base for international university relations and the condition for their sustainable development (Ye et al., 2013).

Analysis also suggests that the sustainability of these relations depend, in a great degree, on corresponding organizational structures, particularly for social systems oriented towards stimulating innovation. For example, Ivanova and Leydesdorff (2014) show that the sustainable development comprising self-organization, caused by non-linear interactions, can be achieved in systems with number of actors more than two. This paper builds on that concept and brings new evidence of emerging forms of foreign–government–university triple relations.

By addressing these issues, the paper leads to a new narrative in the relation between universities, governments and industry. It claims for the need of public policies to go beyond the spatial boundaries imposed by the concept of “national systems of innovation”. It is aimed to address the new conditions for international scientific and academic cooperation and development, to identify main supporting relationships between university, industry and government, and to discuss their impact on the emergence of new social realities in many countries and their potential as factors of economic and social development on a global scale (Chan, 2004). The paper is, therefore, a new contribution about the way international affairs may shape universities and their positioning in increasing globalized societies and economies.

Next section briefly describes the research framework and methodology used in this paper. The third section attempts to explain our conceptual framework and justifies the need to go beyond the commonly used concept of national innovation systems. The paper builds on the so-called “Triple Helix” of university–industry–government relations and considers the changing perception of “academic divide” at world level, as well as the dynamics of the social construction of knowledge-based societies. Then, the fourth section presents our evidence in four parts. It starts by addressing the evolution of university partnerships, from student mobility to knowledge-integrated communities. Then, the second part presents key issues described in the literature in association with US research universities, taking into particular consideration the leading role of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, in that process. The third part presents the Portuguese initiative on international partnerships, as launched in 2006, and the fourth part discusses the specific case of MIT–Portugal joint venture. The fifth section discusses our main findings in terms of the conceptual framework given and the paper concludes with a set of main summarizing remarks.

2. Research framework and methodology

The analysis presented in this paper draws from international comparative studies, fieldwork and interviews conducted over the last three years, in addition to the author’s self-experience in research, university administration and policymaking in the field of science and higher education. On-site visits and many discussions with researchers and policymakers were carried out to address challenges for the internationalization of higher

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