

Workshop IV

International competition: Implications for educational providers and students

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Key points

Peter West

- Institutional and student perceptions of the inclusion of higher education in GATS are frequently hostile. Even if some of this hostility is based on misunderstanding or misplaced anxiety it has to be addressed: false perceptions have a real effect on behaviour.
- Amongst the concerns are: commercialisation of higher education will conflict with the public service mission of institutions; a global market will bring standardisation and homogeneity; state-funded institutions will lose out to those privately-funded; cross-subsidy within institutions will become impossible and minority programmes will be lost; the link between Governments and institutions would be weakened and may eventually break.
- Higher education must be consulted and won over before trade agreements are concluded: for the institutions this will mean recognising that some of their activities are indeed commercial and fall within the scope of GATS; accepting that liberalisation does not inevitably imply deregulation; and agreeing as a sector on the regulation of standards of quality, student support and cross-subsidy.

Per Nyborg

- The European higher education community agrees on the importance of higher education. The Bologna process is breaking down barriers and strengthening quality.
- There is little evidence of European desire to make education commitments under GATS. But significant progress has been made through the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of qualifications, and similar conventions in other UNESCO regions, to improve the flow of information to students and employers and to open access to further study and employment internationally.
- The way forward is to continue to build trust and to break down barriers in this consensual way. The perception that GATS will force institutions and countries to change accepted practice is damaging.

Jacob Henricson

- Education is a public good, not a commercial product; students are not consumers
- Commercialisation may bring some short-term gains but in the long term it will be damaging. The education market will exclude the majority of potential students and will tend to increase inequity; it will undermine the democratic function of higher education.
- Exclusion from decision-making breeds misunderstanding and conflict. Students feel under-represented in the Forum and unhappy with the apparent direction of policy. They should be regarded as partners in the process.

Discussion

- It was agreed that higher education world-wide requires investment. There is a substantial unmet demand. Opinion was divided as to whether the market was the appropriate way to promote higher education in the long-term.
- Some felt that to regard students as consumers in a market increases choice and strengthens accountability. Public provision has rarely been successful in providing access to higher education to disadvantaged groups and it has not adequately responded to the lifelong learning market.
- Nevertheless the so-called global market is primarily an anglophone market and there are legitimate concerns about loss of cultural identity and the extent to which non-English speaking students will be served; there is no evidence that the market will provide for those with low purchasing power.
- Higher education is not homogeneous. Debate should make a much clearer distinction between undergraduate programmes forming part of a young person's initial education, and the diversity of other courses and programmes which make up higher education.
- Progress will be achieved through dialogue and the building up of trust.