Some reflections about the characterisation of Universities

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My central argumentation

1. We have a short sighted view of the role of universities in society: educated people!
2. We over emphasize the role of science in innovation - few industries with narrowing relative role in employment
3. We underestimate the importance of universities as economic actors, as employer, providers of permanent temporary resources (non resident students), shapers of city planning, culture and leisure, providers of services
4. We do not consider adequately the ways in which the different ‘missions’ are articulated --> the focus of my presentation
Third mission in context (1)

- The tension with the growing role of rankings
- Rankings as revealers of a paradigm shift in continental Europe
  - the university is no longer an undifferentiated operator (training is the same wherever you are)
  - the quality of training depends upon the university (relevance of curricula, performance in delivering knowledge, quality and involvement of staff)
- The specific case of the political visibility of the Shanghai ranking and the shifting political interests (“Europe needs 10 MIT”)

Third mission in context (2)

- Continuing and growing ‘industry’ pressure on professionalisation and intermediate qualifications, linked to the fact that 70% of higher education students never go beyond the bachelor level
- Drives to consider the university globally as a “multi-activity organisation”
- Missions are not an adequate entry point to characterise university activities.
- Objective: reassess the ‘third mission’ dimensions in the 3 main activities identified.
From 3 ‘missions’ to 3 ‘functions’

Mass tertiary education, professional Bachelor & public proximity service

Professional specialised graduate education

U1

U2

U3

Academic training & research in world competition

Mass tertiary education

- Central diploma: professional bachelor
- Mostly linked to proximity (employment area)
- Stakes: adequate curricula (adapted to the needs of the area), individualised mentoring of more and more diverse populations in their knowledge base, teaching innovations, teacher careers
- Main performance measure: student throughput and job obtained
- Key linkage to 3rd mission: providing the relevant central resource in a knowledge-based society
- Options: ‘comprehensive’ universities vs “collegialisation”
Specialised graduate education (1)

- Central diploma: professional masters
- Characteristics:
  - focus on the profession or the industry,
  - recruiting and placement areas are at least national,
  - strong relations with economic actors (stays, internships…),
  - increasing role of European accreditations
- Stakes: the mix of forms of recognition by the profession/industry: internships, continuing & executive education, consultancy, contract research, professional doctorates (or joint ones e.g. CIFRE in France)
- Main performance measure: relevance for the profession or the industry.
- Criteria: jobs and salaries, professional rankings (e.g. business schools)

Specialised graduate education (2)

- Key linkage with 3rd mission: industry/sector/profession oriented linkages
- Options linked to Europeanisation (accreditation mechanisms) -->
  - Strong Europe --> stratification: top league, top specialised schools, national/regional players
  - Weak Europe --> multiplication of local, small size masters (the “everything in my region” syndrome)
Academic training and research (1)

- Scientific communities are defined at world level --> recognition and influence as driving forces
- 2 key products: articles et PhD
- A central movement: the growing role of research co-operations (with colleagues elsewhere, in other disciplines, in other institutional settings)
- Stakes: the relevant shaping of production spaces (labs, institutes, networks)
- Main performance criteria: articles (citations) and then: prizes, attractiveness for doctoral candidates, role in the life of communities

Academic training and research (2)

- Main linkage with 3rd mission: co-research with large firms, IP and spin-off firms, mobility of HR
- Options?
  - in all cases a growing concentration on a limited number of research-led universities
  - secondary option: multi-domain vs specialised research-led universities
  - circled by universities enabling ‘identification’ and ‘initial professionalisation’ of potential high-class researchers.
- Question? Which linkage with good ‘specialised graduate schools’?
University profiles: Very different mixes

- Few universities have a strong research potential in any European country
  - long construction process (history matters)
  - very low ratio students / academic staff
- More and more universities specialise in one discipline/domain (e.g. Karolinska)
- More and more efforts to develop professional specialisations (e.g. the rise in France of DESS before the Bologna change).
- A vast majority of Universities where ‘mass tertiary education’ is the central activity

Return on rankings

- Rankings do not have the same meaning for different universities
- Shanghai ranking only measures one ‘function’ and is relevant for only a very limited number of universities
- Do we need other rankings? And what for?
- Remember: rankings are present everywhere to help ‘students / customers’ to select where they go - e.g. the Brownian movement at master level in France
Return on third mission (1)

- Third mission was historically important to highlight the “ivory tower” fallacy - and oblige organisations to account for what they do for society, beyond providing Human Resources
- Its present development may be turning counter-productive, third mission becoming an instrument to generate revenues
- The most cited forms (IP, start-up…) appear as a secondary characterisation of a function already vastly over-emphasized.

Return on third mission (2)

- The three proposed functions provide a framework to locate ‘third mission’ aspects
- Their principal implications are that
  - we should focus more on training contents
  - soft forms (internships…) might have stronger effects
  - there is no such thing as ‘free lunch’: organisational changes are crucial to deepening most dimensions cited (collegialisation, staff careers, differentiation between schools within universities…)