Chapter 10

Neo-Liberal Governance in Higher Education: The Quest for Enhanced Reputation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the emerging trend in tertiary education to manage institutional reputation, and it offers evidence from case studies in developed and emerging economies to support the analysis. The evidence presented suggests that this activity is global in scope and is associated with the ever-increasing competitive environment in which universities and other tertiary colleges find themselves. The management of reputation appears to revolve around the core activities of research and teaching and the development of an international environment, suggesting a convergence of governance at the micro level. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a new perspective on neo-liberal governance in HE, and to show how the current emphasis on international competition and the knowledge economy affects individual institutions in different national systems in different ways. The chapter also points to the challenges that the quest for enhanced reputation may present managers.

INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in previous chapters of this book, tertiary education policy is increasingly important on national agendas as a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. What underlies this focus is an acceptance of international competition which is driven by international markets. Across the globe, the individual tertiary institution is, and has been for the last quarter century, necessarily caught up in this competitive drive, perhaps particularly where the individual institution is acting as an individual corporate entity. One developing facet of this relatively new, multi-faceted environment, is the need for the individual institution to enhance its own reputation as a learning and research centre. The rationale for this focus on reputation is that it is part of the jigsaw which constitutes the wider political and economic contexts and shows at the local level how institutions are developing. It is timely to reflect on ‘reputation’ since it has now

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become a strategic goal of increasing numbers of institutions rather than an outcome, as it once was.

This chapter, then, aims to analyze this emerging trend in tertiary education, that is, the increasing imperative to enhance institutional reputation; the chapter aims to offer case studies which provide an empirical dimension to the concepts discussed, and to offer managers some insights into the problems, pitfalls and possibilities should they find themselves with these responsibilities for institutional reputation management. The case study institutions range geographically from examples in Brazil, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the UK, and is the result of qualitative interviewing in institutions in those countries. That there is more focus on the performance and reporting of research outcomes of higher education (HE) institutions, and of teaching in all tertiary institutions, is but one sign that the reputation of those institution matters. The chapter reports on perceptions in the tertiary sector regarding institutional reputation and the activities which institutional actors are prepared to engage in, in order to maintain and enhance reputation, and how this willingness to act transforms the institution. Implicitly then, this is a commentary on neo-liberal governance in tertiary education (HE), or rather, a particular element, or facet, of neo-liberal governance. Such governance is, at the current time, the subject of some critique, and one could argue that it is timely to dwell upon governance issues in the tertiary sector, as many institutions embrace corporate identities. What this analysis reveals is the nuance of the drive for reputation in the various contexts, and how national priorities do not always follow the path of the neo-liberal.

The chapter will consist of four sections. Firstly, I discuss the notion of reputation. In the second section, I set out a number of contexts: the debates surrounding globalisation and HEIs in the last half century, followed by the nature of the case study institutions from which the data has been collected, and their national contexts. In the third section I present the purposes and approaches taken by the leadership of the case study institutions. I then present a discussion around the topics of the transformation of HEIs, the nature of the changes and the effects on core missions and values, after which I draw conclusions.

1. A CONSIDERATION OF REPUTATION

As I write this from my office in the UK, the corporate world is reeling from yet another shock in this crisis, or post-crisis, era. This week it is Barclays Bank, and the allegations that traders have been involved in the illegal activity of ‘fixing’ inter-bank interest rates. What interests me particularly is the use of the word ‘reputation’, and its many spin-offs, in the comments of those who the media have persuaded to speak on the topic. There is talk of the impact on the bank’s reputation, discussion of ‘reputation-damage’ and how this might be limited, concern that the ‘brand’ will take a long while to recover. Clearly the health of the business and its brand are inextricably linked to its reputation, at least in the minds of those involved in the corporate world: brand and reputation appear to be the DNA of the business, and seem to be enmeshed in a double helix. I think back to an earlier corporate crisis from 2011. News International Corporation was in trouble over allegations of phone hacking; what interested me here was the speed at which the management assessed the damage level to the reputation of a UK newspaper, the News of the World, and decided that there was no hope for recovery. The newspaper was shut down. Clearly the decision reflected the fact that the twenty first century cannot live without the oxygen of a sound reputation. This chapter addresses the notion that many institutions in the tertiary sector are equally reliant upon this oxygen, and seeks to understand what actions they are prepared to take to enhance reputation.