

**TRANSFORMING THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY SYSTEM  
INTO A RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT**

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# **Transforming the Global University System into A Resource for Social Improvement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The universities around the world constitute a significant resource for social improvement. The end of authoritarian governments has led to greater freedom for universities to innovate and to learn from each other. The global university system can be thought of as consisting of three parts – universities themselves, their relations with their local communities, and their relations with other universities at home and abroad. Improving the welfare of people around the world requires sharing, modifying, and using methods and practices that have proven to be effective. Success in creating a global “knowledge society” and economy will be greatly facilitated by a well-functioning global university system. This paper suggests strategies for improving these three aspects of the global university system and provides links to useful resources.

**Keywords:** Quality Improvement, Service Learning, Distance Education

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years the global university system has been transformed by technological and political trends. The internet and lower cost international travel have made it far easier to collaborate with academic colleagues in other countries. In addition, the end of the Cold War has expanded the participants and the range of points of view in international academic conferences. As a result it is possible now to think in terms of a global network of universities with local nodes rather than in terms of specific brick and mortar institutions. There are three ways to strengthen the global university system – strengthen universities as separate institutions, enhance the contributions they make to their local and national communities, and facilitate international interaction among professors, students, and universities.

In addition to doing research and educating the next generation of college graduates, universities can contribute to their local communities more quickly and more directly. Graduate management students at The George Washington University (GWU) in Washington, DC, do projects to improve the performance of local organizations – businesses, government agencies,

and non-profit organizations. For management classes these projects are similar to the laboratories in science classes. When doing the projects students make use of the ideas and methods discussed in class. For example, during the past academic year a group of students at GWU worked on improving the management of the immunization of students in local public schools. Another group worked on helping to document and systematize the management of the Adult Education Program of a local public school system. A group of students worked with the owner of a restaurant, making the computerized cash register work and teaching the owner how to do accounting and pay her taxes. Some students did projects with agencies of the federal government. A group of students worked on improving the logistics management system of an agency. Another group worked on the contract closeout process of an agency, reducing the backlog of contracts still open and improving project management. Two groups of students worked on overseas projects via email. One group developed recommendations for reducing corruption in the banking system in Ukraine (via email with a person in Ukraine). Another group of students worked with the Somali Television Network (via email with an owner in London), providing advice on organizational structure, business processes, and journalistic ethics. Finally, a group of students worked to introduce the United Nations' Global Compact and Learning Forum ([www.unglobalcompact.org](http://www.unglobalcompact.org)) to GWU faculty members.

In addition to reaching out to the local community, universities are also working more closely with colleagues in other countries. Since 1994 the Research Program in Social and Organizational Learning at GWU has been hosting visiting professors from the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union (NIS) under several programs funded by the US Department of State, particularly the Junior Faculty Development Program ([www.gwu.edu/~rpsol/visitsch.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~rpsol/visitsch.html)). These visiting faculty members audit classes, present papers at conferences, revise the syllabi of courses they teach, and experience American teaching methods. An email list allows us to keep in touch with GWU alumni of these programs. Several of the visiting scholars continue to work with the people they met at GWU. They co-author papers, cooperate on panels at conferences, host former GWU advisers during the advisers' trips to the NIS, and work on education or research proposals together. As a result the global university system becomes more integrated. Ideas, curricula, and teaching methods are shared. Faculty members implement reforms in their universities and improve local communities by introducing new perspectives, visions, and knowledge.

As a result of their different histories there are important differences between universities in the West and the East. In comparison with universities in the West universities in the NIS have tended to emphasize education in the natural sciences rather than the social sciences and humanities. Education in NIS universities has been more theoretical than practical. NIS education has been broad, but not deep. As a result college graduates in the NIS often have heard of key concepts but do not know how to apply them. There are many educated people in the NIS because education was compulsory and free. But the quality of education has declined as the economy has declined.

In the NIS there are many new private universities where students pay money and expect to get a degree in return. These universities, being independent, are more flexible and often more democratic. However, the quality of instruction is not always high. State universities must answer to the Ministry of Education. As a result they are less flexible and less

innovative. Getting things done in universities often requires personal connections and bribes.

## **TO IMPROVE A SPECIFIC UNIVERSITY**

Today people in the post-communist countries have many more opportunities for creating autonomous, democratic universities than just a few years ago. How can professors in transition countries take advantage of their new opportunities to improve their universities? Based on experiences at universities in the US and the NIS, we have several suggestions.

### **Learn From Others**

Know who your competitors are and learn from them. One of the authors, Stuart Umpleby, studied engineering at the University of Illinois. As editor of the student engineering magazine for two years, he became quite familiar with the College of Engineering. The College wanted to be the best College of Engineering in the country. In this College it was very easy to initiate change. All one had to do was to say, "MIT has such a program," or "Stanford already does this." From then on the burden of proof lay with those who were opposed to the innovation rather than with those who were in favor. This is the idea of "benchmarking," which is well-known in quality improvement circles. If the people in an organization decide that they want to emulate or surpass another organization, they are likely to look carefully at what the other organization does. Of course, no two organizations are exactly alike. The local context must be considered.

Kirovohrad State Pedagogical University (KSPU) has enriched its academic potential greatly by having faculty members and students participate in exchange programs. KPSU is a member of university networks doing team research. For example, there is a project with Montclair State University in New Jersey on the pedagogy of critical thinking. The Tempus network of universities is popular. KPSU was recently listed among the ten best universities in Ukraine as a result of the progress it has made. KPSU has cooperative programs with universities in Poland, Austria, Germany, UK, and USA. All of these programs serve to enrich the education provided at KPSU.

### **Have a Strategic Plan**

Creating a strategic plan means defining a competitive advantage. The University of Illinois wanted to be an outstanding research university. The problem they faced was how to distinguish themselves from other large state universities, and, specifically, how to attract bright, young researchers. They thought their physical location was a handicap -- corn fields for hundreds of miles in all directions -- particularly when compared with physically attractive states such as California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Florida. They decided that they would have the most advanced computers in world. They reasoned that some of the most advanced research in many fields requires the most advanced computers. By being a leader in computer technology they had a chance to attract some of the leading researchers in many fields. They also provided a very supportive administrative climate for doing research -- minimum bureaucratic obstacles. Professors were expected to write proposals and do research, not to learn in detail the procedures for how to pay people or buy equipment. This strategy has worked very well for several decades. The Illiac I, II, III, and IV computers were state-of-the-art research computers. There were also more specialized computer-oriented laboratories on campus, for example, the

Computer-based Education Research Laboratory and the Biological Computer Laboratory. Mosaic, the forerunner of Netscape, was invented by a graduate student at the University of Illinois.

In the NIS private universities have more opportunities to innovate, since they are more independent. State universities, being more well-established and bureaucratic, are not as flexible. State universities must obtain approval for changes from the Ministry of Education.

The majority of NIS universities are known for having an orthodox approach. Innovations are not welcome in university policy and curricula for many reasons. All innovations must be approved by the Ministry of Education and by special methodology boards within the universities. Not all universities have enough money to experiment with new programs and curricula. Developing a new course is usually a volunteer activity by an individual professor. New courses are needed, but there are no funds to develop them. Access to the internet and to major libraries is limited because of lack of funds.

In addition some "old school" professors believe that the "Soviet" approach to education was best and that no changes are needed. But students are demanding changes. So, nearly all reforms happen because people at the lower levels want progressive changes and do not want to learn old dogmas. Change has become possible because society has become more open, since there is gradual movement on democratic reforms. The process of transition cannot now be reversed. The international network of universities also creates pressure for change in curricula and teaching methods.

### **Manage Intellectual Competition Creatively**

Academics tend to be critical of one another. The task is to make this criticism constructive rather than destructive. In the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, this feat was accomplished as follows. The faculty in the Institute, led by then-director James W. Carey, claimed that there were basically three approaches to the study of communication: a) A behavioral approach -- survey research, analysis of data, hypothesis testing, etc.; b) A cultural approach -- the oral tradition vs. the written tradition, time-binding cultures vs. space-binding cultures, etc.; c) A cybernetic approach -- principles concerning communication, whether it occurs in machines, human beings, or social groups. By claiming there were three approaches, no one group ever had an "ideological" majority. (In terms of numbers, the behaviorists outnumbered the other two groups.) Graduate students would associate themselves with one of the three approaches and would argue among themselves the pros and cons of the three approaches. In this way they learned the strengths and weaknesses of their position and of the other positions. Because all three positions were considered valuable, no one feared that he or she would be driven out of the department for unorthodox views. Indeed, the advocates of the minority positions were valued because they brought different perspectives to any issue.

### **Use Quality Improvement Methods**

Create a group that will introduce continuous quality improvement methods throughout the university [1]. These methods are increasingly being used in American educational institutions following their success in corporations, government agencies, and health care institutions. In 2001 the first Baldrige Awards for education were awarded ([www.quality.nist.gov](http://www.quality.nist.gov)). Key ideas

are to think in terms of processes rather than tasks, to define process improvement teams, and to empower the people on the teams to make improvements in the processes in which they work. Decisions are made not on the basis of internal politics, but rather by obtaining data from the "customers" of a process. "Data-driven decision-making" creates an environment in which people are confident that suggestions will receive a fair hearing based on their merits. Suggestions are considered by the team working in the process, and the person making the suggestion receives a reply, following careful consideration.

### **Encourage Faculty Research**

Some universities emphasize teaching. Others emphasize research. The advantage of a research university is that research brings in additional money that is used to buy equipment and support graduate students. Many universities that have started out as teaching institutions have moved in the direction of doing more research. To create a strong research university, it is important to continually praise the leading researchers. At the University of Illinois every time an administrator made a speech, he or she would praise the University's long record of research contributions -- computers, radar, particle accelerators, earthquake-resistant buildings, semiconductor lasers, etc. These speeches had several effects: They made the leading researchers feel important. They told young faculty members whom to emulate. They told students which faculty members to study with. They told alumni that their university was making important contributions to society. And they told politicians and the public that the quality of life is improved by supporting research. Hence, every speech by an administrator restated the vision and mission of the university and illustrated how it was being realized.

More and more universities in the NIS are becoming involved in research projects. This work helps the universities to survive economically, because it provides another source of income. Universities work with businesses on their research and development projects. Students sometimes find jobs as a result of this research. Students often take courses while working for local firms.

## **TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

Many talented people are associated with universities. These people can be a resource to local businesses, government agencies, and civil society organizations. Universities are usually the educational, scientific, and cultural center of their communities. The more open the university is to changes and international networking, the more open the surrounding community becomes.

In the NIS universities and local communities often stay separate for economic reasons. They do not cooperate as much as in the US. One reason is that professors are overloaded. Their workloads are so heavy they do not have time for volunteer work. Also, the way courses are organized and conducted does not permit assigning students to do group projects with local organizations.

### **Expand Service Learning**

One way that universities can contribute to their local communities is through service-learning or having students, as individuals or groups, work with local organizations to improve their performance. These activities provide practical experience as part of management, engineering,

and social science classes. For example, students in informatics can be helpful in assisting civil society organizations with their computer systems. By doing this work, students learn how information technology is actually used in organizations and the problems organizations encounter.

Courses that include service-learning are more common in the U.S. than most other countries. Traditional methods of instruction may need to be modified in order to give students credit for this work. Rather than changing the way all courses are taught, it may be easier and quicker to create a new type of course in which service-learning activities are conducted.

In the NIS service learning to local communities is volunteer work. Professors have limited time. Professors do not welcome assignments to give lectures in the local community, because they are not paid for this work. But more and more students are involved in volunteer activities through a variety of organizations, usually as a result of their own initiative. Volunteer work is rarely promoted or organized by the university.

### **Imitate Campus Compact**

Service-learning courses are a growing part of higher education in the US. To promote such activities a group of university presidents in the US has formed an organization called Campus Compact ([www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)). Its purpose is to increase the number of university presidents who are encouraging students, faculty and staff to work as volunteers in the local community. Campus Compact also shares information on innovative programs as examples. Similar organizations in other countries would help to strengthen civil society organizations and spread useful methods and practices to businesses and government agencies.

### **Improve Processes in Local Organizations**

The quality improvement methods mentioned earlier can be used by all organizations – businesses, government agencies, institutions of civil society, universities, hospitals, etc. Ideally professors would first use these methods to improve their universities and then use them, and have their students use them, to improve other organizations outside the university. For information on the US quality award program, see [www.quality.nist.gov](http://www.quality.nist.gov). For information about quality improvement activities in Russia, look at the website of the Stockholm School of Economics in St. Petersburg, <http://www.sseru.org>. The European Quality Award is described at [www.efqm.org](http://www.efqm.org).

One very useful method for continuous quality improvement in a university or any other organization is a Quality Improvement Priority Matrix. This is a simple survey method that is used to identify the concerns and priorities of customers and employees. For examples of this matrix, see the articles by Naoumova and Umpleby [2] and Umpleby and Melnychenko [3]. These articles are available at [www.gwu.edu/~qisc/list.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~qisc/list.html). Surveys of customers and employees would ideally be done each year. The data can be processed and displayed using Excel. Using quality improvement priority matrices is a way of focusing efforts on the issues where improvement will bring the greatest return in customer satisfaction and employee morale. These matrices are a simple and effective way of helping local organizations improve themselves.

A very useful group of methods for problem-solving and planning is called the Technology of Participation. These methods of group facilitation can be used when working with communities, businesses, government agencies and university departments. Each unit of the university could use these methods to conduct a planning activity about once a year. The methods can also form the basis of consulting activities by faculty or students with local organizations (businesses, government agencies, and institutions of civil society). The widespread use of these methods seems to require that people be willing to share useful methods and innovations. This willingness is present to a greater degree in some societies than others. People are often surprised by how well these methods work in practice [4].

## **TO STRENGTHEN INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC COOPERATION**

The technologies of international travel and the internet make faculty communication and collaboration on papers, research, and conferences much easier than before.

### **Increase Faculty and Student Collaboration**

Joint faculty research and co-authoring of papers seems to be increasing. Rather than doing a study on one campus, the same study can now be done on several campuses. Joint research of this kind aids in transferring research methods and knowledge of related research. Also, international comparisons or studies of cultural differences can be a part of research that previously would have had only a local or national perspective.

In addition to faculty collaboration via the internet, students can do projects with students in other countries via the internet [5]. Students in advanced English language classes can take part in academic discussions on the internet [6]. Such work helps to improve their English, enhances their understanding of the internet and acquaints them with the topics being discussed in the West.

### **Use Existing Opportunities**

As the number of students and faculty traveling increases, the international services office of a university needs to increase in size to aid the travelers. Furthermore, universities need to increase their capacity to write proposals. Exchange programs, such as the Junior Faculty Development Program, are financed by the U.S. Department of State (<http://exchanges.state.gov/education/nonfulb/>). There are also institutional partnership programs (<http://exchanges.state.gov/education/niscupp/>). Other countries have similar programs.

The Salzburg Seminar ([www.salzburgseminar.org](http://www.salzburgseminar.org)) is an educational institution based in Salzburg, Austria. They hold week-long seminars on a variety of topics in the social sciences and humanities. English speaking faculty members are encouraged to apply to one of their programs. They usually have scholarships to help with the expenses of scholars from the East. They also have a Universities Project for university administrators in the NIS. Reports from this project are available at their website.

Additional links to resources for scholars in the New Independent States can be found at <http://www.gwu.edu/~rpsol/schresource.html>. Probably the most important source of support in

the long run, is to develop relationships with businesses, government agencies and foundations in the home country.

### **Standardize Degree Structure and Semester Schedules**

There has been some movement in Europe toward the U.S. system of having bachelors, masters, and PhD degrees. There are also some changes occurring in semester schedules. These changes are occurring for several reasons:

- Faculty or student exchanges become easier. It is easier to do a "semester abroad" if the schedule of semesters is roughly the same.
- It is easier to transfer credit from one university to another if the number of weeks in a semester and hours in a course are the same.
- Cooperation among students via email on group projects (e.g., in international business or cross-cultural management) is much easier if the semesters overlap almost completely. As collaboration among students in different countries increases, friendships established through classwork can carry over to sharing "neat sites" on the worldwide web. These activities further facilitate the sharing of information across borders.

Some universities are setting up overseas campuses where their students spend a semester abroad. Universities set up their own campuses overseas in order to simplify scheduling and the transfer of credit. An alternative is to have a cooperative program with a university in the foreign country. There may be some advantages in seeking out university partners to work with. Currently most collaboration is conducted by individual faculty members working on research projects. These arrangements sometimes evolve into more formal institutional ties.

### **Cooperate in Offering Distance Education**

A knowledge society, and hence the demand for highly skilled workers and for constant training increases the demand for degrees, certificate programs, and distance education. Distance education becomes increasingly attractive as new media expand the "bandwidth" of the content offered via distance education. Distance education programs, such as the British Open University, claim to be able to provide comparable education, in terms of exam scores, at one-tenth the cost of brick and mortar universities. Hence, distance education will no doubt continue to grow, particularly in developing countries where fewer people can afford traditional higher education.

Perhaps each university should experiment with offering on-line or distance education, if only to become experienced with what teaching methods are effective in this medium. Currently some universities offer a few courses but not a degree on-line. The Global University Alliance ([www.gua.com](http://www.gua.com)) makes it possible for students to take distance education courses from several universities. This gives distance learning students a larger selection of courses than they would have if they were dealing with only one university.

Web-based software designed to help instructors teach courses, is now increasingly widely used by instructors in the U.S. to supplement lectures and printed materials. Such web-based materials are also very widely used when teaching via distance learning. See (<http://www.blackboard.com>). Furthermore, once educational materials are available via the Internet, they can be easily shared with faculty members on other campuses.

## CONCLUSION

The opportunities for collaboration among faculty members, students, and universities are now far greater than just a few years ago. It will take time to learn how to make the best use of these opportunities. Conducting many experiments with the results widely shared is an approach quite compatible with the traditions of universities. As faculty members at universities around the world interact more and learn from each other, the contributions that universities can make to their local and national communities will steadily increase.

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