

## Chapter 2

# Higher Education and the Discourse on Global Competition: Vernacular Approaches Within Higher Education Policy Documents

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**Abstract** Over the past few decades, globalization and global competition have become prominent buzzwords in the higher education sector. These two constructs are highly interconnected: Higher education institutions (HEIs) are becoming increasingly linked across borders in a multitude of ways (whether intentionally or not), which in turn engenders competition within the global higher education landscape. The drive toward globalization and global competition is clearly evident; its effects are not uniform, however, and local entities mediate global trends. In this chapter, we build upon our prior work by investigating evidence of the discourse on global competition (DGC)—a pervasive rhetoric about excellence, rankings, and world-class status—within national higher education policy documents. Our aim was to ascertain to what extent the DGC was evident in these policies alongside other localized priorities. Before delving into this analysis, we frame the study by outlining trends and developments related to globalization in higher education. We also delineate our approach to the study, which entails employing the construct of vernacular globalization and qualitative policy document analysis strategies.

**Keywords** Global competition in education • Discourse of global competition • Excellence in higher education • Higher education competition • Higher education policy documents

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## 2.1 Higher Education Trends and Developments

The higher education sectors of countries across the globe have expanded in recent decades. Two of the most prominent developments within the higher education realm are massification and the related effort to serve broader and more diverse student populations. Other salient trends are connected to neoliberal economic tenets that favor free markets and limited government intervention—ideologies and practices that prevail throughout much of the world. In the higher education sector, neoliberal trends have resulted in increased commercialization, privatization, industry-higher education partnerships, managerial forms of governance, and market-like behavior, all of which signal a shift away from the social democratic values that had been prominent in higher education previously (Hazelkorn 2014; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Within this neoliberal framework, higher education has increasingly become a commodity to be bought and sold, rather than an avenue for social progress. Indeed, the World Trade Organization's 1995 General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) stipulated that higher education would be subjected to the free market principles that prevail in commercial and economic sectors for member countries (Shields and Edwards 2013). In this context, higher education has become increasingly connected to national economic advancement and development of human capital to support economic vitality (Rizvi and Lingard 2010).

Another key development connected to trends in the higher education realm is the emergence of a global knowledge economy with a new division of labor that includes knowledge producers, knowledge users, and passive or non-users (Friedman 2005). Knowledge producers are central in this division of labor, as “knowledge and people with knowledge are the key factors of development, the main drivers of growth, and the major determinants of competitiveness in the global economy” (Gürüz 2008, p. 6). The knowledge economy emphasizes the production of knowledge and activities that are knowledge-intensive, accentuating the role of HEIs (Gürüz 2008; Marginson 2013; Rizvi 2004). The emergence of the global knowledge economy signals an impetus for HEIs to focus on preparing students for a post-Fordist society in which technological skills, new forms of knowledge, and flexibility are key (Duderstadt et al. 2008; Gürüz 2008; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Indeed, private sources of global capital have begun to invest heavily in higher education's efforts toward knowledge production for economic strength (Altbach and Knight 2007). In turn, HEIs continually “behave in more competitive and enterprising ways” (Yang 2005, p. 114), engendering increased competition between and among them.

Finally, and more importantly, global competition in the higher education sector has emerged during an era of increased globalization—a multidimensional phenomenon involving a conglomeration of social, economic, political, and cultural processes that result in a heightened interconnectedness and awareness between and among countries and their citizens (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Robinson 2007; Steger 2013). HEIs are not immune to the changes globalization generates; indeed, it is no longer possible for HEIs to operate in completely insular ways. Various trends and

developments in the higher education sector have led to a heightened emphasis on international benchmarking and being globally competitive.

## 2.2 The Manifestation of Global Competition in Higher Education

One of the most observable markers of global competition in the higher education sector is the development of global university rankings. Although the United States and several European countries have used national HEI rankings or league tables for a number of years, the first *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU) published by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Institute of Higher Education in 2003 was significant because rankings became a global endeavor at this point (Hazelkorn 2014). ARWU was originally designed to gauge China's universities' standing against global competitors, though it quickly translated into a powerful if contentious global phenomenon. Two additional ranking mechanisms—*Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (THE) and *Quacquarelli-Symonds World University Rankings* (QS)<sup>1</sup>—have also gained significance, while a number of other systems have emerged over the past 10 years (e.g., Webometrics, Spain's SCImago, and Europe's U-Multirank). Many scholars have criticized the measurements ranking systems use as methodologically unreliable and overly narrow, given that they tend to focus on English language publications in specific journal types (Marginson 2013; Ntsohe and Letseka 2013; Rhoads et al. 2014). Institutions from the United States and United Kingdom dominate the three main global rankings (ARWU, THE, and QS), and few countries and HEIs have the ability to compete with dominant players. Nevertheless, higher education policy makers increasingly utilize global university rankings to make key decisions (Hazelkorn 2008; Wildavsky 2010).

Ranking systems are both a product of and a driver of global competition. Whether or not they are viable players in the hierarchical global higher education sector, HEIs of all types are participating in a “reputation race” for international stature and prestige (van Vught 2008). As Rhoads et al. (2014) contend, global ranking schemes contribute to the reputation race because they accentuate the superiority of a particular type of institution: the elite research university, which Marginson (2006) has called the Global Research University (GRU) and Mohrman et al. (2008) have labeled Emerging Global Model (EGM) institutions. Marginson (2006) posited that GRUs are top-tier HEIs that emphasize enhanced research capacity, display global interconnectivity, and project globally-focused missions and priorities. GRUs represent central resources for governments and industry partners concerned with knowledge production and innovation. Similarly, Emerging Global Model universities are characterized by global missions, knowledge production, diversified funding, emphasis on commercially-valuable research, worldwide recruitment of faculty

<sup>1</sup>The *Times Higher Education* and Quacquarelli-Symonds rankings began as a joint entity in 2004 and split into separate ranking mechanisms in 2009.

and students, increasingly complex organizational structures, new partnerships with government and industry, and greater collaboration with EGMs worldwide (Mohrman et al. 2008). Focusing on GRU/EGM institutions leads to the valorization of a particular form of excellence, one that is firmly entrenched in neoliberalism and does not take into account the variety of institutional types needed to broaden participation in higher education (Bagley and Portnoi 2012).

Given the increasing attention paid to GRU/EGM institutions in the global rankings era, one of the most common strategies governments employ to make their higher education systems and institutions more globally competitive is developing world-class universities (WCUs). Although there is no universally accepted definition of “world-class,” the characteristics of WCUs tend to align with the GRU/EGM schema: global engagement, elite status, high research intensity and productivity, and significant funding (Altbach 2004; Khoon et al. 2005). Numerous countries have employed the strategy of developing WCUs, including Singapore, South Korea, India, Thailand, Germany, and France. Governments often prioritize funding to increase the stature of a small number of their HEIs. China’s 211 and 985 projects,<sup>2</sup> for example, were designed to elevate the position of a small number of elite universities through “promot[ing] innovation and creativity as well as international competitiveness. Similarly, Russia intends to focus on elite institutions with the express goal of having at least five universities as top-100 contenders on global university rankings by 2020 (Vorotnikov 2013). Other nations seek to build WCUs from the ground up, as with Saudia Arabia’s King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which was created in 2009 with the express purpose of becoming an elite global research university.

In addition to developing WCUs, governments and HEIs commonly employ five other strategies (separately or in combination) to improve their stature and prestige within an increasingly hierarchical higher education landscape (Portnoi and Bagley 2011; Bagley and Portnoi 2014). University mergers constitute a strategy closely tied to WCUs. Harman and Harman (2008) described mergers as “formal combinations or amalgamations of higher education HEIs with the aim of enhancing competitive advantage, or merging for ‘mutual growth’” (p. 99). Mergers often combine “strong” and “weak” institutions to solidify market share, thereby fostering global competitiveness and the possibility of developing WCU status. Given the increasingly global nature of higher education, another key strategy is internationalization, both at home through curricular and extracurricular innovations and abroad through the exchange of students and scholars (Knight 2004). Drawing top international scholars and students to HEIs is important for “a university’s status and recognition as a highly qualified global institution” (Shields and Edwards 2013, p. 244), especially given their contributions to HEIs’ research prowess. Related to internationalization is the strategy of cross-border higher education (CBHE), also referred to as

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<sup>2</sup>Launched in 1995, Project 211 focused on strengthening 100 HEIs with funding from central and provincial government sources as well as matching funds from HEIs. Project 985 followed in 1998 to develop 39 HEIs as strong contenders on global higher education rankings by emphasizing research and attracting elite international scholars.

transnational or borderless higher education, which involves delivery models such as international branch campuses, joint degree programs, and distance education.

With the changing nature of higher education, quality assurance—both related to foreign providers within a host country and to regulation through accreditation and international benchmarking—has become one of the most ubiquitous global competition strategies. Numerous countries have national quality assurance authorities, while regional quality assurance bodies such as the Asian-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and international entities such as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (INQAAHE) have emerged. Finally, regional alliances (e.g., the Bologna Process) are another common global competition strategy, one in which partners may benefit from collaborating and providing greater combined strength to participate in the global reputation race.

Clearly, trends toward globalization and global competition are evident in the higher education sector worldwide. Yet, are these trends monolithic and uniform? This is a question we have explored throughout our work on global competition in higher education, including the present research study.

### 2.3 Employing a Vernacular Globalization Approach

The evolution of our scholarship on global competition in higher education has led us to employ a vernacular approach that emphasizes the importance of local context. During the process of editing *Higher Education, Policy, and the Global Competition Phenomenon* (Portnoi et al. 2010/2013b), we recognized how global competition manifests in multifaceted ways around the world. Through “vernacular globalization,” or local entities mediating dominant forms of globalization (Appadurai 1996), context-specific realities play a role in how governments and HEIs react to developments in the higher education realm. When considering whether or not there is a global competition “phenomenon,” it becomes clear that the answer is both yes and no. Despite the existence of trends toward increasing the global competitiveness of higher education institutions and systems, countries and HEIs do not employ strategies in a uniform manner. Context plays a significant role and countries’ local realities mediate dominant trends (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Appadurai 1996; Bagley and Portnoi 2014; Portnoi and Bagley 2011; Rizvi and Lingard 2010).

Over the past several years, we have continued to explore the vernacularization of global competition in higher education. Recently we published a research article (Portnoi and Bagley 2011) based on a secondary analysis of existing literature in which we employed Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) “glonacal agency heuristic,” which allows for the agency of various entities (including national governments, regional blocs, HEIs, and others) to launch counter-movements to global trends. Our findings aligned with Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) key assertion that numerous actors are involved in a multidirectional process through which global trends and developments are incorporated into regional, national, and institutional contexts.

In the present study, we explored vernacular globalization further by seeking primary empirical evidence related to the mediated manifestation of the DGC within higher education policy documents. Our study was guided by the following three research questions: In what ways, if any, is the discourse on global competition (DGC) evident in governmental higher education policy documents from countries across the globe? What, if any, variations exist based on the local context? To what degree are other national priorities reflected in the documents? We began our research with the assumption that evidence of vernacular globalization would be present in higher education policy documents and sought to test this assumption. Although we had a clear premise, our research questions were open-ended to allow for other possible findings.

## 2.4 Research Design and Data Analysis Methods

Our research with higher education policy documents covered two main phases: (a) in Phase I we collected, sorted, and coded relevant documents, and (b) in Phase II we analyzed a subset of the policies using an adapted version of Saldaña's (2012) two-cycle qualitative coding process. We employed a qualitative methodology to identify patterns and meaning within the text of the documents in order to better understand how the discourse on global competition manifests in higher education policies. Rather than using quantitative content analysis procedures common in communication and media studies, we opted to employ an inductive approach that would allow us to build in-depth understanding (Bogdan and Biklin 2007; Merriam 2001). Throughout the study, the research design remained emergent and fluid, and we continually revised and enhanced our procedures as the process progressed.

In Phase I, we collected primary governmental policy documents (policies, strategic plans, legislation, reports, and other documents) and arranged the collection by the United Nations regional categories—Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, and Latin American and the Caribbean—and then by country within each region. Documents were collected through several online sources, including search engines and sites hosted by the United Nations, the World Bank, and national education ministries. All of the policies we collected for the study were in English and available on the Internet. The final sample for Phase II included over 300 educational policy documents from more than 100 countries. We coded and categorized each document descriptively by type; they ranged from stand-alone higher education policies to specific subsets of higher education (e.g., quality assurance) to general education policies that referenced higher education. The full list of document type codes included: (a): HEO (higher education overview/strategic plans); (b) HEQA (higher education quality assurance), (c) HEEA (higher education equity and access issues), (d) HELD (higher education legal document), (e) HEC (higher education competitiveness/world-class), (f) HEGE (higher education within general education), (g) NDP (national development policy), (h) PRS (poverty reduction strategy), (i) VT (vocational training), and (j) O (other).

For Phase II, we sought to compare “varieties of apples” through purposive homogenous sampling (Patton 2002), and limited the sample to stand-alone higher education policy documents projecting countries’ intentions and visions for their higher education systems (e.g., national policies, objectives, and strategic priorities). All of the documents were full-length policies in the 100-page range. Although there is no global standard for this type of policy, we sought to include documents that were as similar as possible, and countries that did not have a stand-alone, full-length policy document emphasizing strategic priorities were excluded from the sample. The final sample of documents we analyzed in Phase II came from Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, Chile, France, India, Ireland, South Africa, Vietnam, and Yemen.

During this second phase of the study, we completed a two-cycle coding process with the smaller sample of documents, building on Saldaña (2012), followed by comparative analysis of the policies. First cycle coding involved both holistic and provisional coding. Through holistic coding we labeled “chunks” (or lines) of text descriptively based on their general content. Holistic coding allowed us to gain a broad understanding of the topics covered within the documents. A second step in first cycle coding involved provisional coding with a “start list” of provisional codes related to the discourse on global competition, based on our review of the literature and prior research. To develop the start list, we created separate indexes and then worked together to establish a combined set of codes. The provisional code list was open to new additions or modifications as needed, and we subsequently collaboratively revised the list after we had each coded the same three documents. Some codes were collapsed, while others were renamed or deleted. The final provisional coding list contained 19 entries, including “global vision,” “knowledge production,” “quality assurance,” “rankings/ranking systems,” “reputation/excellence/status,” “research,” and “world-class aspirations.”

Second cycle coding involved pattern coding to move up from codes to categories and themes based on our original holistic and provisional coding. This process led to the development of themes regarding each higher education policy document, and facilitated comparison across policies. We developed salient themes regarding each document independently, and then collaboratively combined our themes into one set of findings. Adding a unique layer to Saldaña’s two-cycle coding process, in the third and final level of our analysis, we compared results from the documents to seek not only evidence of the DGC present in each document, but also the variety of additional issues and concerns highlighted therein. We also considered variations based on the local contexts in which the policies were created.

For the research presented in this chapter, we selected three countries’ policies to highlight, in order to provide in-depth analysis of each country’s documents as well as comparative findings. The selected countries—Afghanistan, India, and Ireland—represent different political, historical, and socio-cultural realities; this heterogeneity allowed for comparative analysis aimed at addressing our research questions. Afghanistan’s policy is called “National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2010–2014,” while India’s is named “Inclusive and Qualitative Expansion of Higher

Education: 12th Five-Year Plan, 2012–2017,” and Ireland’s is titled “National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.”

## **2.5 Evidence of the Discourse on Global Competition (DGC) in Higher Education Policies**

Through our analysis of the higher education policy documents from the three countries profiled in this chapter, we discerned a continuum of evidence related to the DGC, with Ireland at the high end of this continuum, Afghanistan in the middle, and India at the lower end. Although all three documents contain, to differing degrees, market-driven discussions about how higher education can assist in enhancing the nation’s economic status and ranking within an increasingly globalized landscape, these vary depending upon context, and—as we predicted—are balanced by more localized concerns. Below we present and discuss findings on the first two research questions by focusing on evidence of the DGC in each country’s policy documents and variations in evidence of the DGC across the contexts. Next, we discuss findings related to our third research question on the degree to which other context-specific priorities are reflected in the documents.

## **2.6 The DGC Continuum: Varying Evidence in Ireland, Afghanistan, and India**

Ireland’s policy is strongly indicative of the DGC. The document is infused with a market sensibility and is full of the “buzz words” we most strongly associate with global competition, such as “world-class,” “rankings,” and “reputation.” Ireland repeatedly references the need for promoting the knowledge economy within its borders. For example, the Executive Summary notes that “higher education is central to the economic renewal we need” given that “the people who enter higher education in the coming decades are the job creators, policy-makers, social innovators and business leaders of the future” (p. 9). These statements position Ireland’s HEIs as drivers of the knowledge economy and central to economic revitalization. Indeed, the document notes that Ireland has “made great strides in increasing the number of people in the workforce with higher levels of education,” which is important because “as the knowledge economy develops, the quality of Ireland’s workforce will increasingly depend on the quality, relevance and responsiveness of our education and research system” (p. 33). The policy also highlights the need for citizens who can update their skills and competencies throughout their careers due to the “growing demand for upskilling” (p. 46).

Closely aligned with the goal of promoting knowledge production is strengthening Ireland’s workforce, given that the country’s “capacity to generate jobs—both in



indigenous enterprise and via foreign direct investment” (p. 34)—is viewed as dependent on workforce quality. Striving towards innovation and enterprise is another dominant theme throughout the document, closely aligning its goals with the Global Research University/Emerging Global Model schema. In a section entitled “The need to foster entrepreneurial imagination,” Ireland notes that “the sustainability of the Irish economy relies on our success in nurturing indigenous enterprise as well as our ability to remain an attractive destination for leading multinational companies” (p. 37). Market-driven rhetoric is especially dominant when Ireland enjoins its HEIs to “become more active agents in *knowledge transfer* than before and gain greater value from inherent *intellectual property* by engaging more effectively with *enterprise*, and by incubating *new companies*” (p. 38, emphasis added). As aspiring Emerging Global Model institutions, Ireland’s HEIs seek greater industry-university collaborations.

Promotion of a strong research agenda is also central, with priority given to “research areas with the greatest potential for national economic and social returns,” as well as research “fully conducive to the capture, protection and exploitation of Intellectual Property and enhanced enterprise competitiveness” (pp. 66–67). Ireland specifically sees itself as poised to become “an innovation and commercialisation hub in Europe” as “a country that combines the features of an attractive home for innovative R&D-intensive multinationals while also being a highly-attractive incubation environment for the best entrepreneurs in Europe and beyond” (p. 32). The connection between higher education and global industry, as well as Ireland’s desire for global research prowess, is markedly evident. Meanwhile, Ireland discusses university mergers (specifically to create large technological universities), maintaining internationally-trusted quality assurance structures, and intensifying internationalization efforts—three of the key strategies countries and HEIs employ to develop and sustain a globally competitive edge.

Afghanistan’s higher education policy document also contains evidence of the DGC, though to a lesser extent than Ireland’s policy. The policy indicates the desire to be “internationally recognized” (p. 3), and international norms and standards are referenced in relation to improving overall quality as well as promoting “international mobility and recognition” (p. 7). The document signals a desire for Afghanistan to be able to compete within a globalized economy, with the Ministry of Higher Education seeking “to ensure that policy changes make it possible for public higher education institutions to be entrepreneurial” and “produce graduates who are competitive in a market economy” (p. 7). Global competition is specifically referenced in a statement regarding the need to “provide relevant and quality academic programs” that are not only “responsive to national and regional needs” but “globally competitive” (p. 7). This DGC rhetoric emerges later in the document as well: “For Afghanistan to attain globally competitive status and produce quality graduates, a variety of tertiary institutions offering different types of high quality education is essential” (p. 19). Clearly, both local and global concerns are prominent in this policy.

Many of the specific goals outlined in Afghanistan’s policy document—such as strengthening teaching and research capacity, as well as addressing overall quality

control and improving faculty training and incentives—align with those of Western higher education ideals, indicating a distinct intention to integrate Afghanistan’s system into an increasingly rankings-driven global landscape. Similarly, the desire to promote “proficiency in English, as the global language of communication and also the language of the Internet” (p. 12) signals an awareness of the need to shift beyond local cultural norms in order to produce graduates capable of interacting and competing on a global scale. These goals align with trends and developments in the higher education realm, especially given the predominance of English in global ranking mechanisms.

India’s higher education policy demonstrates the least evidence of the DGC in comparison to Ireland and Afghanistan, though excellence and quality—clear DGC “buzz words”—are dominant themes throughout the document, and an entire chapter is devoted to “Enhancing Quality and Excellence in Higher Education.” In this section, a number of DGC-related priorities are discussed, including the need to attract high-quality faculty, to incorporate “global perspectives” into the curriculum (p. 93), to promote research, and to collaborate and cooperate with industry. All of these notions align with common global competition strategies and key aspects of the Global Research University/Emerging Global Model schema. As in Ireland and Afghanistan’s documents, India’s policy continually references international norms and standards, thus indicating an acknowledgement of higher education’s inevitable positioning within a global landscape as well as its awareness that “with necessary recognition and support,” it “has the potential for extending frontiers of knowledge in all disciplines” (p. 88).

India acknowledges that it currently has very few globally recognized HEIs and that one of its goals is “promotion of Indian Universities to find their place among the top 250 Universities of the world through the international ranking processes” (p. 113). Though not highlighted prominently in the document, India’s recent efforts to create an Indian “Ivy League” of *navratna* universities is noted, specifically through the statement that “some Indian Universities have enormous potential to reach world standards in teaching and research” (p. 102). The document notes the country’s intention to grant greater autonomy to the top echelon of HEIs. All of these developments appear to be designed to develop a small number of HEIs that align with the Global Research University/Emerging Global Model framework.

All three policy documents profiled here show evidence of the DGC, though to varying degrees and in diverse ways. As suggested by our second research question, manifestations of the DGC are highly dependent upon local contexts, histories, and concerns. Ireland’s document is the most saturated with DGC rhetoric, indicating a strong desire and perceived ability to position the country’s higher education system within a globally competitive landscape. As a developed country with a relatively strong higher education system already in place, Ireland goes into significant detail regarding its aspirations towards world-class status. In Afghanistan’s document, on the other hand, the DGC is strongly driven by the country’s need to align its emergent system with the norms of Western higher education in order to produce graduates capable of competing on a global scale, thus contributing to the war-torn nation’s fragile economy. As we discuss in the following section, Afghanistan

acknowledges a number of locally mediated concerns and priorities that must be addressed before its institutions can compete on a global scale. Finally, the DGC in India's document is primarily focused on promoting quality and excellence throughout its higher education system. India discusses the country's potential for world-class status in its top institutions, and has explicit goals in this area. However, the three primary priorities reiterated throughout India's document—equity, expansion, and access—relate more to local, regional, and national concerns than to global posturing. These localized priorities are the focus of the next section.

## **2.7 Vernacularization of Priorities: Beyond the Discourse of Global Competition**

In addition to researching varying degrees of prevalence of the DGC in each country's policy document, we sought to determine to what extent more localized concerns and goals were present. We found a diverse array of contextually-specific priorities evidenced in each country's policy document, reflecting the highly vernacular nature of higher education initiatives within countries across the globe.

Ireland's policy document makes it clear that the purpose of economic development through higher education is not only to promote the nation's global competitiveness but also to support individual well-being and social equity. In addition to highlighting DGC-related goals of improving collaborations with business and industry and partnerships on an international scale, Ireland notes the importance of joining forces “with the civic life of the community, with public policy and practice, with artistic, cultural and sporting life and with other educational providers in the community and region” (p. 74). Thus, more local, less market-driven concerns emerge in tandem with the DGC in Ireland's policy.

Responding to the needs and concerns of all of Ireland's students is an important focus throughout the document. Ireland notes a desire to offer higher education through more flexible venues and to encourage greater access by allowing and encouraging non-traditional students to align their post-secondary schooling with their current jobs. In addition, in a section specifically devoted to the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education, Ireland discusses its intention to solicit feedback from students, to identify entry-level gaps in student knowledge, and to better address diverse student needs and learning styles.

The delicate balance between the DGC and more vernacular concerns in Ireland is nicely outlined in the document's overview of “high level objectives” (p. 27). Alongside the DGC-related goal of promoting “an excellent higher education system” with a research base “characterised by its international level quality,” Ireland notes its commitment to “attract[ing] and respond[ing] to a wide range of potential students,” making higher education “fully accessible throughout their lives and changing circumstances,” and ensuring that “students will experience an education that is... relevant and responsive to their personal development and growth as fully

engaged citizens within society” (p. 27). Economic, social, and cultural needs are highlighted in these objectives.

For Afghanistan’s higher education system, political and historical contexts are key to its priorities, which incorporate the DGC but only to a limited degree. As “one of the poorest countries in the world” (p. 3) and a war-torn nation in need of extensive repair on multiple levels, higher education is seen as one of eight strategic pillars for national recovery and movement “into the realm of developing economies” (p. 4). The primary vision evident in the policy is to create and maintain a high quality, research-driven higher education system that will “contribute to economic growth, social development, nation building, and the stability of the country” (p. 4). Given its status as a nation dependent on outside assistance, with a need to demonstrate accountability and transparency, Afghanistan overtly addresses donor concerns and contributions throughout its higher education policy.

Other dominant goals in Afghanistan’s policy include improving equity for underserved populations, maintaining institutional autonomy while promoting quality assurance, and “preserving the uniqueness of Afghanistan, its history and culture” (p. 5). The desire to promote “national unity,” “ethics and integrity,” and equity (p. 5) are also strategically highlighted. International benchmarking is present; for instance, the document notes that enrollment “averages out at 2818 students per university, which is very small in size by international comparison” (p. 19). However, such comparisons are couched within candid discussion of specific logistical concerns such as a “shortage of both human and financial resources” (p. 19).

As in Ireland’s document, examining Afghanistan’s overall vision and values for higher education provides a clear snapshot of how the DGC is balanced by vernacular concerns rooted in both pragmatism and social justice. Afghanistan notes that its vision is for “a high quality public and private higher education system that responds to Afghanistan’s growth and development needs, improves public well-being, respects traditions, incorporates modern scientific knowledge, is well managed, and [is] internationally recognized” (p. 3). Its listed values are “high quality tertiary education; [the promotion of] national unity; ethics and integrity; equity; good governance, effectiveness, and efficiency; institutional autonomy; [and] public accountability” (p. 3). These ambitious goals and values highlight the number of vitally important priorities Afghanistan is striving to address as it rebuilds what it describes as a once thriving higher education system in the midst of significant economic and other challenges.

With its rapidly increasing population (currently at 17 % of the world’s total population and steadily growing), India faces a unique set of needs vis-à-vis its higher education system. Given that it has one of the lowest Gross Enrollment Ratios in the world (only 13.8 %, compared to a global average of about 26 %) expanding access across the nation remains a pressing concern. In India’s policy document, equity for under-served populations—including women, students from “socially deprived groups,” and “differently-abled students” (p. 32)—is predominant, along with the explicit intention to “significantly reduce urban-rural, inter-regional and inter-social group disparities” (p. 32). In addition, the country is concerned with correcting the “skewed growth of higher education towards techni-

cal and professional education” (p. 32), and ensuring that regional imbalances are addressed. Promoting equitable, distributed access is central to the country’s vision as outlined in the policy, and key social-justice terms appear in numerous instances. Indeed, word counts reveal that the term “inclusion” appears nine times, “marginalized” 14 times, “access” 74 times, and “equity” 64 times in the policy.

Throughout India’s document, an explicit focus on higher education as a “social and economic good” (p. 13) emerges, as well as the need to maintain a balance between vocational concerns and preserving higher education as “both a public good and as an autonomous sphere for the development of a critical and productive democratic citizenry” (p. 104). Indeed, these factors are noted as an important counterpart to “the encroaching demands of a market driven logic” (p. 104). Clearly, an array of concerns other than competitive global positioning is at play in India’s notion of a high-quality higher education system. India’s stated vision provides a succinct overview of these tensions:

The vision... is to achieve further access to higher education through... creating new universities and increasing the intake capacity of existing universities and colleges. Access will be coupled with equity and inclusion by bridging regional imbalances and disparities across disciplines and shall address spatial, economic, social and technological needs of the country. The initiatives will be capped with enhancing inputs for quality and excellence in all spheres of higher education: student intake, faculty enrichment, curricular and evaluation reform, revamping governance structures, [and] greater emphasis on research and innovation by creating efficient regulatory framework (p. 30).

In this vision statement, DGC buzz-words such as “excellence” and “innovation” exist in counterpart with issues related to access, equity, inclusion, and regional imbalances. Global competitiveness is clearly salient in India’s document, yet it is mediated by vernacular concerns.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Globalization and global competition are central facets of the worldwide higher education sector. Clear developments and trends, such as global university rankings and the valorization of elite research universities, have manifested within higher education. Nevertheless, countries and their HEIs respond to these developments in context-specific ways. Our analysis of Ireland, Afghanistan, and India’s higher education policy documents demonstrates that in addition to global positioning, other vernacular concerns are high on all three countries’ reform agendas. The DGC is clearly evident, but to varying degrees and in diverse ways, balanced by localized priorities. Context remains vitally important to developments within the higher education realm, as nations and their HEIs seek to continually improve their systems for internal reasons as well as for global positioning. Variations in how the DGC manifests across each country’s documents demonstrates that vernacular efforts and goals unambiguously mediate global trends.

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