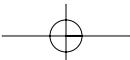


Learning to Compete in European Universities



Learning to Compete in European Universities

From Social Institution to Knowledge
Business

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Preface

We wrote this book for several reasons. One is simply that we want to understand and explain more about competition and evolutionary economic processes. Our curiosity does not stop solely at the doorstep of firms. Indeed, we wanted to ‘test’ whether relatively controversial and vague ideas about competition from an evolutionary and innovation perspective can be applied to understand what is happening in European universities. Americans have of course, known about competition and specialization of universities for a very long time. But what about Europe? What is going on here; do universities increasingly behave like firms or are they changing in some other manner? Participants in the workshops, presentations and writings in the project ‘Universities as Knowledge Environments of the Future’ sometimes surprised us by telling us we were dead wrong or sometimes surprised us by telling us we were ‘too right, mate’, followed up by, they wished we weren’t.

Yet another reason was that we felt that what happens at European universities now and in the near future will affect the future competitiveness of European societies. Now that is a big statement! But we have worked in, talked to researchers, and visited, universities in Australia, the USA, China, Singapore, and many European countries. Many feel that Europe might be falling behind – and yet few seem to have thought seriously about the consequences on firms and society. Or, to put it in EU and OECD language: the question of what is happening, and what can happen to universities – and to their personnel and services – seems particularly urgent to address when more and more European countries argue that they have reached the knowledge society. EU and other national governments have made the argument that despite outsourcing of production and back-office services, ‘knowledge’ production will remain the basis of competitiveness in these countries.

Many writers seem to assume that Europe can continue competing in ‘knowledge’ production. That would suggest that European universities are either doubly important – because they increasingly will be the basis of future competitiveness – or else they could become increasingly irrelevant, if Europe loses out in the global competitive game. Still, wherever the new basis of competition in the knowledge society will be like, Europe has to be part of the game. Most of the leaders of universities know this – but perhaps the stakes are far higher than public policy leaders and firm leaders have so far realized.

A final reason is that academic books like this one provide us editors – whom are active researchers, teachers and societal translators – with an opportunity to work with the larger issues and analysis, rather than the extremely specific and detailed focus of writing journal articles. Many of these chapters will be sharpened, revised, and submitted as journal articles. Still, they have to be based on scientific methods and literature to be included here. This book as a whole – and the underlying meetings and work – does provide us the opportunity to debate, discuss, provoke, confirm and ask questions about larger issues of emergent competition and strategies within universities. Finally, this type of book provides a training ground, so that younger researchers and PhD students can design studies and write in interaction with more senior researchers. They, after all, will create the future and will be the knowledge workers of the future. Thus, despite the metrification of science to journal publications and citations, a book like this offers us the chance to consider how different bits of science link together and form an understanding of a whole, which is not really possible from any of the parts.

This book resulted from the project ‘Universities as Knowledge Environments of the Future’, financed by SISTER (Swedish Institute for Studies in Education and Research www.sister.nu) and their owner-financiers.

Initially, many pieces were written specifically about Sweden, but then it was decided to work on this international book, which kicked-off in December 2005. Its ideas will be further developed through the EU Network of Excellence DIME, Dynamics of Institutions and Markets in Europe (www.dime-org.eu).

A special thanks to Enrico Deiacò for persistently encouraging and arguing for new ways of thinking about what universities do and how they do it. He took the initiative to this work, which involved three Swedish research teams at Sister, RIDE-IMIT and at CIRCLE/Lund.

We wish to express our thank to all the people involved, whom have been authors, discussants, participants or reviewers. In addition, we particularly thank Peter Schilling and Olle Edqvist, both from SISTER. Peter gave many good comments and led much of the Swedish work. Olle on the other hand never stopped asking questions. Indeed, Olle has forever been challenging us to explain what we meant by competition and learning to compete. His comments prompted us to take at least some of these vague concepts, and instead explain and be more specific about if and how they apply to the university sector, which has been extremely valuable for writing the book.

Finally, we wish to thank Daniel Ljungberg for his never-ending enthusiasm and help in finalizing the manuscript! We are much obliged!