CONCLUSION: NEW MILLENNIUM, NEW MILIEU?

The kinds of challenges that face the academic profession worldwide at the onset of the new millennium are an intriguing mix of the generic and the contextualised (Altbach, 1996; Welch, 1997a, 2003, Currie in this volume). Too often, have critics, swept up in the now somewhat feverish terms in which the globalisation debate is sometimes couched, asserted brashly that the state no longer matters: that global forces of culture, politics and the economy are rendering national borders redundant, if they have not already done so.

The preceding chapters reveal that such assertions need to be taken with more than a grain of salt. Certainly, it is possible to point to examples of generic or “global” trends that are powerfully affecting the academic profession at the onset of the twenty-first century. At the same time, in order to understand their real effects, the importance of the local context must be fully acknowledged. In practice, then, the dialectic of the global and the local (Arnone and Torres 2003) is a far more powerful tool with which to understand such changes, than glib generalisations about globalisation effects.

1. THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Two or three examples suffice to illustrate the powerful intersection of the local and the global, in understanding the realities of educational reforms and their impact on the academic profession. While European Union (EU) efforts at harmonisation of their diverse higher education systems, underpinned by the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Declaration, Salamanca Convention, de Wit, 2001), are doubtless an important initiative, it is clear that deep-rooted national traditions are not so easily dislodged. National governments routinely sign declarations. Much more difficult however, is the reform of longstanding practices within universities, hallowed by hundreds of years of tradition. This is all the more the case when academics neither see the point of changing practices with which they are familiar, nor have had the rationale for the changes explained to them in any great detail. And even more the case when government officials, shuttling back and forth from Paris, Rome or Berlin, to Brussels, are also not fully convinced of the merits of the proposals, or the necessity to amend longstanding local practices and structures. The phenomenon of official assent by individual European ministries of education, to such agreements as the Bologna Declaration, (which commits EU nations to move towards harmonised stages and standards in higher education across the European space), being undermined by unofficial cross-national allegiances opposed to the reforms, or at least the speed with which they are supposed to be introduced, is by no means unknown in Europe. As ever, local considerations interact closely with international commitments.
A further generic trend to affect academics worldwide is arguably an outgrowth of the development of mass higher education systems. Evident in many systems of higher education, in both developed economies and the Third World, is an increasing mismatch between spiralling demand for higher education places, and the limited capacity, or perhaps willingness of states to fund this expansion. This is giving rise to several related phenomena, each arguably an index of the rise (perhaps renaissance might be a better term), of ideologies of business efficiency, within public sector institutions, including universities (Welch, 1998, 2004).

On the one hand, against a background of what has variously been characterised as an “age of anxiety” (Barnett, 1996, Beck, 1992), or a crisis of the state (Offe, 1993, Habermas, 1976, Welch, 1997), increasing financial pressures on universities have contributed to ever-rising demands for accountability (Altbach in this volume), on the part of the state. Systems of higher education around the world, are not merely being told to “do more, with less” as when, for example, Chinese universities were told over recent years that they were to receive an additional 25% of students annually, without additional staffing or accommodation resources. But the professoriates are also being pressured to account for their activities, including ways in which they expend their resources, in more and more detailed ways. This has given rise to something of an international cottage industry of developing and implementing so-called quality assurance mechanisms in higher education, although in practice, many academics see little if any positive relationship between such exercises, and gains in quality. Indeed, some have argued the relationship is more a negative one, and that the measures of “quality” that are used function to disguise actual declines in quality, and rather resemble a form of accountancy, than accountability. Such critics argue that these same measures of quality ignore other measures of declining quality, for example, academic staff in several systems are increasingly being casualised, or offered short term contracts, rather than tenure, and that student-staff ratios have worsened appreciably. In Australia, to cite only one example, student-staff ratios worsened dramatically over the past decade - from 1:14.2 in 1993, to 1: 20.4 in 2002 (AVCC 2003), while the proportion of equivalent full-time casual staff has risen by around 60% over the same period (NTEU, 2003).

Moreover, while ministries in Korea, Germany and elsewhere commission research to investigate modes of staff and programme evaluation (Park, 2001, Welch, 2001), that can be married to technologies of performance funding, other research shows just how costly such exercises in “accountability” are, especially of staff time. Certainly, the costs to the system and to individual institutions, faculties and departments have been substantial; and are arguably continuing to rise. The former VC of a British university estimated some years ago, for example, that the costs to British universities of such efficiency audits were in the order of “a third of an average sized university’s teaching capacity, 50 researchers’ work and almost £250, 000 a year in photocopying” (Pritchard, 1994, 258). More recent UK estimates put the figures much higher:

“Fees for 250,000 students; the cost of five universities; the pay of 10,000 lecturers: each equals – but probably underestimates – the £250 million annual cost of quality control, audit, accountability, and research assessment systems in English higher