

CHAPTER 3

Universities in the New Global Economy: Actors or Spectators?

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The title of this chapter is formulated as a question. Indeed, the complexity and interconnectedness of many of the issues and trends changing the landscape of higher education mean that there are far more questions than firm answers facing the leaders of higher education. Furthermore, the answers found are rarely clear-cut or applicable everywhere. Of course, universities are both actors and spectators in the new global economy. In other words, they both drive the changes taking place and are subject to the forces that are transforming our world. But unless we probe further, this acknowledgment does not get us very far in the search for the most appropriate role for universities in a world that is increasingly globalized.

A Broad Topic

The role of universities in the new global economy is a vast topic and one which can be analysed from several perspectives. It invites us to look at the 'big picture' even if we all know that universities face vastly different circumstances between and within different regions and countries in the world. These differences exist even among the members of a national university organization such as, for instance, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) with its ninety-two or more institutions. Looking at the nearly 650 members of the International Association of Universities (IAU), from Kabul University in Afghanistan, which rejoined the association in 2002, to the University of Zimbabwe, and passing through the University of Toronto or Université Claude Bernard in Lyon, for example, the diversity of situations and contexts is truly astounding.