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CERI/IMHE/GC(2000)9/REV1



Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OLIS : 13-Sep-2000
Dist. : 13-Sep-2000

Or. Eng.

**CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
PROGRAMME ON INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

PARIS

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CERI/IMHE/GC(2000)9/REV1

THE STIMULATED ACADEMIC HEARTLAND

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IMHE GENERAL CONFERENCE 2000 - Paris, 11-13 September 2000

95156

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THE STIMULATED ACADEMIC HEARTLAND

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The academic heartland has always been, and will continue to be, of importance in the development of universities that has the ambition to compete with the best. The changes that currently are taking place in the society, such as the fast globalisation, the rapid developments in information and communication technologies and the corresponding new economy, the increased complexity of products and systems, the urgent need for a more sustainable development, the occurrence of new players in the educational field and the changed attitudes among young people, of course implies new challenges to universities. An old Chinese wisdom states that “When the winds of change are blowing some people build windbreaks while others put up windmills”. It is clear that we currently need to build new windmills at universities and build them fast.

The need for research and education that crosses borders and involves stakeholders is obvious. Universities need to increase the promotion of such acts. Cross disciplinary projects and project constellations with various time durations are necessary. It is not very farfetched to guess that young faculty will become increasingly more interested in working in projects in which the background of the project team members are diverse and complementary. The loyalty towards projects will most likely be higher compared to the loyalty towards the institution or the department. This tendency is already clearly seen in new start-up companies working in the IT- and biotechnology areas. Innovative universities need to stimulate formation of transdisciplinary projects and centres as a complement to the more traditional departments and institutions. If this is not done the quality of the academic heartland will gradually decrease.

The entrepreneurial spirit and outreach activities were pointed out by Burton R Clark in 1998 as an important ingredient for expanding and retaining quality in the disciplinary departments. This is today, a few years later, even more obvious. The outreach activities towards industries, through fundraising and joint projects are not only important for expanding the universities financial capabilities but more importantly for being able to address relevant questions for the advancement of our society. Outreach activities are also important in order to retain the academic freedom. The latter, however, implies that contracts, intellectual property rights etc are handled professionally in order not to tie up own university resources aimed at supporting free research. Furthermore, it will be increasingly more important for universities to also stimulate and help researchers and students to start own companies. In doing so it is also important that universities keep a part of the shares in the companies. This will not only help in providing resources for the universities in a long perspective but also help to adopt to the new attitudes being spread in the society as the new economy advances. This will then in turn help to both keep researchers at universities and to attract new young faculty members.

Examples of the above points briefly discussed will be exemplified through examples currently being implemented at Chalmers University of Technology in Göteborg, Sweden.