Reimagining Research and Education in Higher Education - integrating scholarships for sustainable human development

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Introduction

This contribution examines key intersections between development, higher education and research. It suggests that the interactions between these domains are neglected and argues that higher education's contribution needs to be re-imagined to address problematic divides between research and education, between education and other disciplines and between global educational and development goals. Drawing upon Boyer's re-imagination of 'scholarships', research is re-situated within an ecology of practice comprising engagement, inter-disciplinary collaboration and teaching. A current crisis of meaning and values is emerging in higher education, with the dominant arguments in favour of human capital formation. Yet, the indications are that the pursuit of human capital on its own is unsustainable, unless it is balanced with an understanding, and protection of, natural and social capital. A case is made for higher education to integrate scholarships, focused on the question of sustainable human

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development, and using rights as an integrative concern and grounding for global higher education.

Re-imagining research and education in higher education - re-connecting scholarships

'Research' can be defined as 'systematic investigation or inquiry aimed at contributing to knowledge of a theory, topic, etc., by careful consideration, observation, or study of a subject' (Oxford English Dictionary). Research is associated with originality, independence, rigour and an academic setting, but its role is often assumed to be self-explanatory. It is argued here that the role of research needs to be clarified and reconfigured in relation to the other core contributions of higher education, if it is to respond to the challenges of sustainable human development. The work, or 'scholarship', of research must be re-connected to other 'scholarships' of engagement, interdisciplinarity and teaching (Boyer, 1990; 1996). Traditional divisions - between academic theory and practice, between higher education institutions and their publics, between research and teaching, and between the different disciplines need to be overcome, to enable sustainable human development to become the central focal point. Integrating research with teaching, engagement and inter-disciplinary dialogue broadens the actors and audiences of higher education to involve all disciplines and professions, policy-makers and the public in knowledge creation and meaningful participation. The four 'scholarships' should not be separated or traded off, but treated as complementary means. Hence research, or 'the scholarship of discovery', should be valued *in relation to*, not *over*, engagement, interdisciplinarity and teaching - towards the goal of sustainable development.

Redressing the neglect of higher education

For the past several decades, the international development consensus has focused almost exclusively on primary education. Higher education was excluded in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015) agenda, whether in its own right, or as a potential means to address the other MDGs. The limited approach to education has been criticised for its deleterious impact, endangering by extension, the prospects for endogenous and sustainable development (Sawyerr 2004; Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe 2013). In part due to such concerted critiques, higher education is back on the global development agenda as we enter the post-MDG development era. Proponents argue that higher education plays a crucial educational role in development, by educating the engineers, health specialists, teachers, policymakers, technologists, and scientists whose work is crucial to improving people's lives. Through research, higher education also generates the knowledge required to address issues like poverty, food security, disease, climate and environmental change (Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe 2013, 3).

However, the exact relationship between higher education and development remains unclear. A recent review (Oketch et al 2014) suggests that economic, or 'human capital' perspectives predominate. Higher education leads to improved individual as well as national outcomes in relation to earnings, productivity, technological transfer, capabilities and institutions. Societal or macro-level benefits are also suggested, but these are more difficult to quantify than individual benefits. However, low investments in higher education logically correlate with lower research output and lower levels of knowledge transfer, and less enterprise and societal benefits, which low-income countries are most obviously in need of. Alternative perspectives point to higher education's role in strengthening individual and institutional capabilities, and its contribution to the realization of human rights through improvements in health, nutrition, gender equality, democratisation and the environment. However, the evidence is dispersed and further research is needed (Oketch et al 2014, 6). The arguments for higher education fail

to address two central questions – how higher education actually contributes to improvements in human development and how such gains can be made more sustainable.

The scholarship of integration and the challenge of sustainable human development

Looking beyond 2015, the proposed 'indicative Sustainable Development Goal' for education is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all' (United Nations Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals 2013). Interdisciplinarity, the 'scholarship of integration', connects the aspirations for sustained inclusion, equity and human development. Sustainable development is contested, involving complex interactions between science, politics, policymaking and development (Khoo 2013). Human development and sustainable development evolved as separate approaches, the former being largely concerned with aspirations of people and the latter trying to balance development aspirations with environmental limitations. New interdisciplinary research enables human development and sustainability to be linked, using multi-dimensional development indicators like the Happy Planet Index. However, this new global synthesis presents a worrying picture for the future as nearly all countries are failing to sustain improvements to human development within environmental limits (NEF 2012). Climate change - arguably the most serious global environmental threat - is not, or insufficiently, accounted for, even in these progressive new measures (Khoo 2013).

Higher education in 'hard times' – ethical responses to globalisation

Higher education is experiencing 'hard times', as the values and purposes of education and knowledge are increasingly contested (Walker 2006). The research agenda is part and parcel

of a broader drama of growth, crises and reform of higher education. There is a demand for universities to perform wider roles in the 'knowledge society', providing more discipline based education, professional training and basic public research, but also more applied, profit and private-sector focused outputs. There is some recognition for traditional values of academic freedom and intellectual autonomy, but greater emphasis has been placed on the responsibility of higher education for promoting social equity and inclusion. Yet the contradictions are considerable, as the political pressures are to rationalise, downsize and increase centralised control, with diminished political support and financial resources for public higher education and increased reliance on individuals and the private sector to fill the breach. Pressures for international competitiveness have led governments to drive performance management, institutional branding and global market positioning, with higher education institutions locked into a global race for the 'world class' status to ensure government, fee and research income. Research agendas increasingly eschew traditional scholarly values, in favour of 'impact', market values and global competitiveness. Reform is also pursued for its own sake, propelled by the global expansion of managerialism. Economic crisis in the global North has shifted the arguments for higher education away from a Keynesian or 'demand-side' approach that sees the development of educational infrastructure as a public investment, towards neoclassical orthodoxy preferring a deregulated 'supply side' approach. Instead of societal development or collective or public benefit, the state's role in shaping higher education is replaced by deregulated markets.

The grounding and integrative power of human rights

Markets and economic growth offer only one perspective on progress and development. Equality, human rights and human development provide valid alternative perspectives on

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development (Walby 2009). These are inter- and trans-disciplinary, drawing together different ideas and debates within development studies, law, gender studies, food, health, education, environmental and security studies. Debates about the meaning of development and the concerns with economic development, wellbeing and progress are not restricted to developing countries as they are also taking place across the global North. The recent economic austerity and social crises in many developed economies has moved the debates beyond academic research and into the broader public realm. Ethics, justice, and grounded global sensibilities (Massey 2009, 80; Munck 2010) connect the different issues and disciplinary knowledges. A grounded approach to globalisation connects the theoretical and practical concerns of higher education, extending ethical questions beyond 'research ethics', narrowly defined, to broader questions about why higher education is valuable and how it relates to individual or collective development, and the state of the planet. Former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson argues that human rights offer a form of ethical globalisation (*Realising Rights*, no date). Human rights offer a set of transdisciplinary norms that are of practical use to diverse actors and constituencies engaged in global advocacy and problem-solving. Steiner (2002, 317) concurs that human rights has moved narrowly defined scholarly concerns, to offer a set of norms, as a 'lens' through which diverse issues such as development, gender, terrorism, religion or even pandemics can be viewed. Higher education institutions play a critical role in fostering the study and teaching of human rights as '[f]ew institutions other than the university are positioned to undertake such work'. Research universities play a critical role in the global human rights movement because they are uniquely positioned for critical and interdisciplinary debate. There is a fundamental fit between the '…basic tenets of the international [human rights] instruments – freedoms of belief, inquiry, advocacy and association' and the foundational values of the higher education itself (Steiner 2002, 318).

Higher education can draw upon the traditions of academic freedom, scholarship and autonomy, as well as the wide spectrum of disciplinary knowledge required to approach the ethical questions of sustainable human development in a concrete manner. It provides the safe and enabling milieu needed for conversations about conflicting versus common values and their relation to universal rights. Research, teaching and the engagement agenda can be channelled towards such conversations, extending across a wide range of disciplinary, professional and practice activities.

Conclusion – the challenges ahead

Those who hope that higher education will play a fuller role in realizing a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development face a challenging scenario. Core resources and support for higher education and research are low, volatile and declining. Current academic monitoring and reward structures encourage trade-offs, not integration of scholarships and academics who attempt an integrated approach may face considerable difficulties and disincentives. Media and political pressure discourage public support for academic freedom and for critical and alternative global visions of scholarship. Finally, higher education institutions are far too preoccupied with problems of financing, competition and relentless reforms to clarify what they stand for. Compliant and risk-averse versions of education prevail in such times, as human capital theory and the imperatives of the knowledge economy make it harder to justify education towards a version of sustainable development that takes on human, social and environmental concerns on an equal footing to economic objectives.

This contribution has argued that higher education has something valuable to offer towards meeting the challenge of sustainable human development, but the challenge of sustainable human development also has something important to offer higher education in return. This

challenge is a powerful tool for engaging an ethical re-imagination of higher education in the current era of globalised and managed (dis-)engagement. The research agenda must move beyond merely research *on* higher education, to encompass a broader questioning of what it is broadly *about*, and what it is *for*, when integrated into an ecology of cross-disciplinary and engaged scholarship.

North-South collaborative research initiatives offer important spaces and examples of partnerships in teaching, training and research that engage development issues (Nakabugo et al, 2010). Research, thus broadly conceived, merits core support not only from official development assistance programmes, but from third level institutions, from the education and development sectors generally, and from the whole gamut of disciplines and professions represented at tertiary institutions. In producing, synthesising, communicating and extending knowledge, higher education plays a pivotal role in the democratization of knowledge. Gidley (2000, 236; 237) suggests that higher education can break out of globalisation's vicious circles, if inspired human agency and a sense of higher coherence are allowed to come in to underpin attempts to solve the problems of the future. She contends that '…[a]cademics, administrators and students alike need to become creatively courageous in reinventing universities if we are to become the creators of transformed futures and not just creatures of the past' (2000, 238). Courage, creativity and a different kind of critical mass are needed to effectively challenge market-rational globalisation, and to recover the possibility of alternative futures. Tertiary education can only play its properly critical role with regard to ethical development and human rights (Steiner 2002), by purposefully diversifying and integrating the spaces of research, teaching and engagement. Their role requires the engagement of a wider public in the production of knowledge about, and practice of, a public pedagogy of human rights and the formation of collective as well as individual capabilities. They play a role in keeping the possibility of democratic futures open, where the quality of

human lives, social justice and human freedom can be freely and authentically decided (Delanty 2001). In response to the disenchanted versions of accountability advanced by management, researchers and educators could counterpose human rights concepts of answerability and constructive accountability (Freedman, 2003).

From the perspective of the scholarships of teaching and engagement, some interesting and inspiring practical examples can be found in democratic experiments in the global South which see higher education as central to the broader reconfiguration of politics and society. The post-apartheid era in South Africa has led to the emergence of a transformative agenda for research and higher education, based on human rights (Hoppers, 2009; SANPAD no date), pointing to a research imaginary which potentially redefines development in endogenous, sustainable and equality-oriented terms. In such cases, there is much that the North can learn *from*, and not just *about*, development in the South and take heart from their visions for more ethical, sustainable and human-centred versions of global higher education.

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