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Leave no one behind. Repositioning Higher Education for achieving SDGs

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Abstract

Recent global disruptions connected to financial turbulence, pandemic outbreak, and global political instability up for hybrid warfare put the 2030 Agenda's vision at risk.

Higher Education (HE) is central to the 2030 Agenda, but its potential hasn't been fully deployed thus far. A stronger role of HE in tackling the world's most pressing issues is therefore necessary. Which requires the repositioning of HE and the reshaping of its principles and practices.

By referring to extensive experience on the ground of the Knowledge for Change Consortium members, and a wide range of contributions from the Global South and the excluded North, this policy brief approaches this need by discussing four interrelated themes:

1. HE for the public good

2. Socially inclusive HE

3. Diversity of epistemologies and knowledge systems

4. Contextual responsiveness and place-based learning

This policy brief calls on HE leaders and actors to promote transformations within their institutions and HE systems, using the recommendations to critically reflect and act to reposition HE for achieving the 2030 Agenda.

UNESCO Chairs of the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education:

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Content

Acronyms

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

K4C – Knowledge for Change Global Consortium

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

UN – United Nations

WHO – World Health Organisation

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was crafted to serve the ambition of "leaving no one behind" with inclusion and shared prosperity as an overarching comprehensive aspiration.

Recent global disruptions connected to financial turbulence, pandemic outbreak, and political turmoil up for hybrid warfare put this vision at risk. As UN's Secretary-General António Guterrez has highlighted referring to Covid19, these global breakdowns show that "while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris".

SDG 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Higher Education (HE) is central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a whole, but its potential hasn't been thus far fully deployed. The Independent Experts Group on Universities and the 2030 Agenda (2022) calls for a stronger role of HE in tackling the world's most pressing issues. Repositioning HE and reshaping its principles and practices are needed to unlock its capacity for sustainable development of humanity.

The UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility of Higher Education has convened a wide range of contributions from the Global South and the excluded North in relation to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the last few years, we have promoted policy dialogues and conversations based on stories and experiences from the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium (K4C). Lepore, Hall and Tandon explain the K4C's objective and structural framework:

> The K4C Consortium aims to develop research capacities for the co-creation of knowledge through collective action by community groups and academics working together in training hubs around the world on issues related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals…(Lepore, Hall and Tandon 2020)

A wide range of case studies analysed against theoretical and empirical insights emerging from our inquiry on socially responsible higher education (Hall and Tandon 2021) provide evidence on how HE principles and practices can be reoriented for the benefit of all.

Context

The past decade ended with the outbreak of a terrible pandemic. By the beginning of March 2022, Covid 19 has claimed almost six million victims (source: WHO). That same decade 2010-2020 opened on the social and economic rubble of the worst financial crisis since 1929. The social fallouts of that crises still ravaged the poorest strata of the world's population when the pandemic broke out.

And now, while the pandemic is far from coming under control, a new hybrid warfare threatens the physical lives of many civilians in the heart of the European continent, while engendering a global instability which, once again, severely impacts on the economic and social conditions of the most deprived worldwide.

The virus has hit an already profoundly unequal world. If possible, the present global political and economic instability due to the most serious diplomatic crises since the end of the cold war further exacerbates this intolerably compromised situation.

Small businesses struggle to survive, workers across the world face an estimated loss of labour income around 3.7 trillion US Dollars, and billions of people across the world hardly fulfil their basic needs. Meanwhile, large corporations in the technology, pharmaceuticals and consumer goods sectors have seen their profit increase exponentially.

Many of these high profit making businesses are knowledge intensive companies. A large portion of their wealth rests upon information and knowledge. They are at the core of the information and knowledge societies. The very nature of these societies is defined by the answers they give to such questions as: Who owns legitimate knowledge? How is knowledge distributed? How and by whom is it governed? Who decides what legitimate knowledge is? Whose knowledge counts?

This set of questions is at the core of debates on knowledge democracy, cognitive rights, epistemic justice. These are not mere academic exercises: they are crucial aspects for the future of our associated life within and among contemporary societies. Explicit deliberations, and implicit assumptions guiding policies and practices on such issues will shape the world in 2030 and beyond.

How can SDGs be made to work for the last person, Gandhiji's concept of '*antyodaya*': the emancipation of last person first?

What role can Higher Education play in this context? How can HE policies and institutional strategies respond to such challenges as inclusion in higher education, but also inclusion through higher education?

Key reorientations

SDGs provide a coherent framework to steer inclusive action and to orient responsible institutional change within HE. They also favour the positive alignment of the different components of HE systems. SDGs act as hinges in so far as they favour the connection between policy and research agendas with societal needs, and ensure their finetuning at different scales: local, regional, and global. In connecting research and teaching to well -charted societal challenges, they also help overcoming fragmentation of knowledge and favour more holistic and pragmatic approaches which solicit dialogue, exchange and coordination among diverse disciplines, epistemologies, knowledge cultures and practices. The Iberoamericana University in México, for instance, which is part of the K4C has begun operating a new curriculum from 2022 for each different program. In every program, three cross-cutting principles are incorporated: gender, inter-culturality and sustainability; these cross-cutting principles are aligned with the SDGs.

We conceive SDGs as a dynamic system of goals under constant revision and transformation. Critical thinking is a traditional capacity of higher education that can contribute to progressive improvement of SDGs through their regular testing in teaching, research, and service. SDGs should not be mere add-ons to the curricula and should be addressed through continuous scrutiny both to advance beyond the 2030 Agenda and to prevent incongruous appropriation of SDGs aimed at serving homologating and discriminatory practices and purposes.

For instance, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), a K4C Hub, focuses on four key thematics – a) environment, b) health, c) youth and d) education which are related to the following SDGs: SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being; SDG 4 Quality Education; SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 10 Reduce Inequalities; SDG 13 Climate Action; SDG 14 Life Below Water; SDG 15 Life on Land; and SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals. USM's research focus is strongly anchored on SDGs, and its day-to-day operations are driven by SDGs. Priorities are only given to projects that are shown to have collaborations with community and societal partners.

Furthermore, one specific strategy to embed SDGs within teaching and learning activity is made through the creation of a general course with a special focus on sustainable development (WSU101). In every semester, students are introduced and tasked to carry out sustainability projects as part of their course requirement and service to the society. Recently, all courses

offered at the university level are required to identify related SDGs in their Courses Structure Form (BPK).

For the Gulu Centre for Community Based Participatory Research, an initiative of K4C Hub at Gulu University in Uganda, structural embedding of SDGs is important because it offers the opportunity for transdisciplinary research and engagement. It opens up a multipronged approach to solving relevant community problems in a more holistic way and from different perspectives. This alone however cannot contribute to knowledge democracy and citizen participation in research and education. More important is the method used to structurally embed SDG's in Higher Education. That is, if solutions and implementation of the SDGs are decided on in an inclusive way- inclusive of all the community (including the university), then the successful achievement will be more likely.

This further suggests that appropriation of SDGs by HE Institutions (HEIs) shall take place from below, to serve contextual responsiveness, rather than being yet another pre-formatted standard enforced from above.

Higher Education for the public good
What is the purpose of higher education in society? If the answer to that question is to promote personal fulfilment, human capital and talent development, preparation, and supply for global labour market, and produce research and innovation to fuel the knowledge economy, then this framework alone will not be very appropriate to achievements of SDGs. It is this very neoliberal, commercialisation of higher education systems around the world that propelled and justified rankings, gradings and the resultant homogenisation, one-size-must-fit-all! How far will this commercial knowledge economy model travel? Growing inequality and poverty, progressive impoverishment of the environment, climate change and now conflicts and the current pandemic, all have shaken its roots. It is time that all societies begin to 'reclaim' the public purposes of HE. It is time that HEIs take full responsibility and strengthen their contribution to building more equitable, just, and sustainable societies. As the UNESCO Independent Expert Group Report on Higher Education and Sustainability elucidates:

> there remains a general consensus that the higher education sector should be kept as independent as possible, with a mandate for research, education, and community engagement all geared towards the public good. (68)

It is important to 're-set' knowledge within a public knowledge common, where respect and transparent sharing of knowledge happens in non-academic and academic, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and intersectional contexts, where knowledge plays a transformative and active role for the benefit of the public good. Dr. Budd Hall and Dr. Rajesh Tandon, long standing advocates for building a knowledge democracy speak of the role of knowledge in addressing global problems:

> Knowledge democracy is about intentionally linking values of democracy and action to the process of using knowledge… Now is the moment to widen the scope of knowledge in society and to move beyond creating socioeconomic well-being towards a true knowledge-based society, through engagement with citizenry as a whole, at all scales of activity, to dealing with the problematic issues of the day and the global issues. (Hall and Tandon 2021.)

It is time that teaching/learning, research/knowledge, and service to society are aligned to a common goal of well-being of all people. In this 'refresh' lies the seed for re-imagining higher education locally, and globally.

Socially inclusive higher education

A key principle of socially responsible higher education is the nature of inclusion it seeks to value and promote. A socially responsible system of higher education makes special efforts to embrace, value and facilitate diversity of perspectives, communities of experiences, as reflected in the student body, teaching and research staff, and societal engagement so promoted. Social inclusion is achieved not merely through national policies, but also through deliberate efforts inside each institution.

This implies moving beyond the historical role of universities as 'producers' of society's elites, and thus reproducer of societal inequalities. Inclusion of hitherto excluded experiences, perspectives and knowledge capacities makes higher education systems more robust and resilient, a critical feature for post-COVID institutional designs. Speaking of a socially responsible higher education that values inclusion and diversity, Dr. Hall and Dr. Tandon state:

> Deviating from the historical role of the university as 'producer' of society's elites, a contemporary socially responsible system of higher education makes special efforts to embrace, value and facilitate diversity of perspectives, communities of experiences, as reflected in the student body, teaching and research staff, and societal engagement so promoted. (Hall and Tandon 2021.)

In this perspective, social inclusion is not merely a social charity, but an integral component of strategy to enhance the quality of learning and research in higher education and to genuinely anchor higher education's mission to universal societal needs.

The National Education Policy 2020 released by the Government of India emphasises certain steps that need to be taken by HEIs to make their institutions inclusive, including providing "*more financial assistance and scholarships to socio-economically disadvantaged students*"; making "*curriculum more inclusive*"; and providing "*socio-emotional and academic support and mentoring for all such students through suitable counselling and mentoring programmes.*" (41, 42)

At Pandit Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, which is one of the K4C hubs, several changes have been made in the teaching and research to make the knowledge production process more inclusive. The University has developed a certificate course on Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR), with the first session being launched in 2018. CBPR has also been integrated as an elective subject in the M.Phil and Ph. D Course work. With regard to the research, students are engaged in contextually relevant SDG-based projects, and have already completed research on issues such as women and child health care services provided by Anganwadi centre: with special reference to village Amleshwar in Raipur District; sexual harassment & its awareness at the work place with reference to sports women; and the role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

In México for instance, the Iberoamericana University that is a K4C hub has developed an inclusion policy by creating two institutional programs. One is focused on working with the inclusion of people with disability called *Somos uno Más*. The other program is called *Si quieres puedes* which gives scholarships to young people who want to study at the University but cannot afford to do so. In both programs, academic, emotional and social accompaniment is given to each student.

The 2030 Agenda calls on HEIs for "leaving no one behind", which necessitates them to test social policies for inclusion in specific domains, such as health, employment and poverty reduction, particularly in the sphere of education to which these institutions belong (UNESCO Independent Expert Group Report 21).

Diverse epistemologies and knowledge systems

Central to this calling is the recognition, appreciation, and valuing of diversity of knowledges, their underlying epistemologies (ways of knowing) and knowledge cultures (norms, values, principles). Historically, the higher education community has defined academic knowledge as only valid, scientific knowledge. Acknowledgement of multiple sites and forms of knowledge is now beginning to be recognised (Tremblay et al., 2015). As it has been witnessed through the pandemic, science is not omniscient. Going forward, there is a need to respect and mobilise the various knowledge systems (UNESCO Chair, 2020).

In the aftermath of COVID-19, multiple epistemologies may indeed have much greater relevance to human life than acknowledged before. This implies overcoming paternalistic understandings of public engagement of teaching and research and elaborating and adopting strategies and practices that ensure mobilization of all actionable knowledge systems at its full potential. This does not simply imply 'inviting' multiple ways of knowing to contribute to a single knowledge production process set from above but accepting the necessary complexity of a non-linear co-operation stream among a plurality of epistemologies that can work together albeit being profoundly irreducible. Epistemic pluralism challenges HEIs to realistically deal with power unbalances.

In the Policy Brief "Open Science Beyond Open Access: For and with communities, A step towards the decolonization of knowledge" the authors state:

> We need to acknowledge that the dominant knowledge practices and institutions have been structured and implemented in such a way as to simultaneously privilege certain epistemic situated values (such as universality, objectivity and truth) while being unjust or dismissive with regard to other, more relational and complex modes of knowledge. (10)

The UNESCO Independent Expert Group Report illustrates the need for engagement of HEIs with community and nature:

> "…we have yet to see many HEIs going further and recognizing the immutable fact that human communities and nature are intermingled, that they shape one another, and that the future survival of both is incontrovertibly intertwined and inseparable. What if higher education leaders acknowledged this, and the required curriculum for a bachelor's degree required courses in holistic ways of knowing, more inclusive approaches to human-community interactions, and a respect for cultures and knowledge systems with centuries, if not millennia, of experience of this approach?" (58)

Adoption of the epistemic pluralism approach by HEIs is exemplified by the Gulu Centre for Community Based Participatory Research affiliated with Gulu University, that promotes training and research in community-engaged research approaches for social justice, and offers particular expertise in Arts Based Inquiry methods and decolonizing knowledge and research. It offers a physical space in the centre of town to connect community and university research and engagement needs, as well as an open office and planning space. The space belongs to a local NGO with focusses on Action Research, and is paid for by ongoing research projects.

The centre is directed by a multi-stakeholder board of Civil Society Organizations, small business owners, and representatives of Gulu University. The Centre also has informal partnerships with several community organizations through various joint research projects and community initiatives. It offers short workshops and full courses in Community Engaged Research techniques. These are available for both university and community members. The facilitators are certified trainers in Community Based Participatory Research, through the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, of which the Centre serves as a hub. The Centre's programs combine practice, reflection and theory.

The way forward for HEIs is powerfully articulated by Dr. Hall and Dr. Tandon in their paper "*Decolonization of knowledge, epistemicide, participatory research and higher education*":

> It is time for those of us working in higher education to move beyond our already strong ability to reflect and critique; we are so very skilled in those first two stages of intellectual work. But we must now make the move from reflection and criticism to creation. We can create in our own lives in terms of what we choose to read and share with others. We can create in the organization of new types of courses. We can create new research and learning partnerships with community activists and social movements. We may have a chance to create new academic programmes. Some of us may create new higher education structures. As we move towards creation we will find much to draw inspiration from.

Place-based learning

Effective mobilization of all actionable knowledge systems entails contextual responsiveness. In HEIs, what is taught, what is researched and what is served derive purpose from being responsive to the context. Pluralism, inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and commitment to the country's development are the guiding principles of higher education, and universities should strive to interact with the community and engage in socially relevant teaching and research. Socially responsible higher education is contextually responsive and locally rooted. Its curriculum, pedagogy, themes and methods of research and priorities for service are responsive and relevant to local contexts, communities, and society. International comparative education and global theories are not dismissed; neither are European languages excluded. But, locally articulated theories, in local idioms, concepts and languages are recognised, valued, and then integrated. To integrate contextual teaching and research at the institution, Iberoamericana University has been working towards building a relationship with civil society, to contribute collectively towards social transformation.

University of Ibagué's initiatives in Colombia can be elucidated using the metaphor of "*Breathing Region*". Just like the process of breathing involves inhaling and exhaling, when the University inhales region, it is oriented towards an attentive listening to the region through respect for its own knowledge and focussing on the needs and interests they pursue. When the University exhales region, it is through projects or strategies that are built with the communities and come back to them for '*positive transformation*' (Colombia K4C Hub). The metaphor of breathing is directly connected to the care of the territory that the university inhabits, which forms the central axis of all work that involves the reconstruction of Colombia as territories of peace. Peace in the plural, or "hacer las paces" as popularly known in Spanish, implies democratizing knowledge, fostering participation based on respect for difference and building a world in which many worlds can co-exist. As displayed above, '*our ways of knowing must include more holistic, contextual and grounded approaches*' (UNESCO Independent Expert Group Report 83).

Recommendations

Foster responsibility and autonomy through social accountability

To be contextually responsive a university must keep a meaningful degree of autonomy, so to be able to effectively concur to community welfare through pertinent strategies, institutional architectures and plans of actions. Autonomy is a distinctive feature of Higher Education and a key factor for designing equitable partnerships. Autonomy is a fundamental component of genuine responsibility.

The necessary connection between autonomy and responsibility can be fostered through specific forms of social accountability which ensures a positive alignment of institutional strategies within the institution itself and with community's needs (horizontal alignment). "Social accountability is defined as an approach toward building accountability that relies on

civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations that participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability" (Malena et alii 2004).

Ensure HE policy and strategy alignment across all system levels

Policies are effective when a vertical alignment across the different levels of the system's governance exists. This means that policies aimed at promoting social responsibility of higher education must organically address the institutional level, as well as the regional, the national and the international levels. Where the alignment among those different levels is assured, substantial and durable change is observed. The NEP 2020 also speaks of a multi-level implementation strategy for the Policy:

> "Such implementation will require multiple initiatives and actions, which will have to be taken by multiple bodies in a synchronized and systematic manner. Therefore, the implementation of this Policy will be led by various bodies including Union and State Governments, education-related Ministries, State Departments of Education, Boards, NTA, the regulatory bodies of school and higher education." (62)

Abandon competition rhetoric and rankings

Governance by numbers is supported by narratives which legitimize and crystallize inequalities. Enough with table league rhetoric: good research and teaching can be defined as "robust", "useful", "effective". The rhetoric of excellence and competition as driving forces of supposedly good science shall not become the only metrics, and learning and innovations relevant to the local contexts should be recognised too.

Various forms of national and international ranking systems have been created to measure the performance of HEIs. Such a system of ranking is causing higher education to become increasingly irrelevant to society. Rankings are imposing further homogeneity, which is neither existent, nor feasible, least of all desirable. In the Policy Brief (Chan et. al. 2020), the authors describe the inequities caused by the ranking system:

> One of these inequalities stems from the obsession of many universities in the Global South for rankings and impact factors, even if the latter are based on criteria set by powerful institutions in the Global North which ignore their reality. Very few journals from the Global south are recognized as having enough value to be included in these rankings. (5, 6)

Not only do rankings tend to attempt false comparisons, but the metrics are also biased in favour of western knowledge systems. Global university rankings systematically establish and preserve the dominance of a tiny selection of elitist universities in the white majority global North. The articulation of ranking devices from global to local scale amplifies and validates inequalities throughout each level of the higher education system.

Foster diversity through equitable partnership with societal actors and stakeholders' engagement

Socially responsible HEIs are diverse in design, structure, models, and methodologies, and are responsive to diversity of contexts, communities, ecologies, and challenges. Rankings make universities socially irresponsible, in that they tend to disconnect with local context, language, knowledge and culture. Diversity of assessment frameworks, thus, would lend local societal relevance to academic efforts, making it more feasible and incentivised for practice. Specific forms of assessment conceived through active involvement of main societal stakeholders and that make universities socially accountable are preferable.

Societal contexts within a country vary greatly; so do social actors. HEIs need to find ways to engage with such diversity of social actors in a mutually respectful manner, learning and teaching together. It is this alignment that will make HEIs contribute to achievements of SDGs in a sustainable manner.

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