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Social Responsibility in Higher Education: An International Perspective

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Abstract

In this post-pandemic world, it is important to have a new, more inclusive and robust framework of social responsibility in higher education. This brief will highlight key features of socially responsible higher education pertaining to the World High Education Conference (WHEC) themes of Inclusion in Higher Education, Higher Education Governance, Quality and Relevance of Programmes, and the Futures of Higher Education. Key elements include 1) Recognition of diversities of knowledge systems and epistemologies; 2) Integration of teaching, research and engagement missions; 3) Contextually responsive, locally rooted, place based and linguistically plural; 4) Socially inclusive, seeking diversity amongst students and academics; 5) Pluriversality replacing universality; 6) Transcending rankings and 7) Reclaiming the purpose of higher education as a common good. This policy brief, will review these key elements in more detail to advance the prevalent discourse on social responsibility of higher education. This set of principles strengthens a new, more societally oriented, knowledge democracy perspective on social responsibility of higher education. In the emerging aftermath of COVID- 19, such a knowledge democracy perspective is required to re-position and re- align higher education institutions, policies and systems around the world.

UNESCO Chair: Community-based Research and Social Responsibility
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Content

Acronyms

HEI - Higher Education Institution

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

Over the past decade, a growing body of scholars, networks, and practitioners had begun to speak about social responsibility of higher education. The infiltration of values of commercialisation, individualism, competition and self-interest had resulted in a culture of inward-looking, narrow conception of HEIs as 'walled' institutions dis-connected with rest of society. The voices of such alternative practices of socially responsible higher education became louder as the pandemic disrupted 'business-as-usual' of students, academics, publishers and policy-makers (resource providers) in every national system of higher education.

Quite in anticipation, albeit unaware of the impending virus-wave, the UNESCO Chair on Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education had launched a global call for collecting and compiling new volume on innovative and diverse practices of socially responsible higher education world-wide. The book "Socially Responsible Higher Education: International Perspectives on Knowledge Democracy" was published as open source, open access, free-downloadable title carrying 22 contributions from authors around countries in April 2021.

Encouraged by the response to the theme of social responsibility, the book launches and debates around the various aspects covered in this book reached hundreds of people through six virtual dialogues with more than 36 speakers and partnerships with such agencies/networks as Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi), International Association of Universities (IAU), PASCAL, Talloires network of Engaged Universities, Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), the International Islamic University Malaysia, University Grants Commission, Association of Indian Universities; National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA).

The themes of WHEC 22 essentially point towards different aspects of transformation required to make higher education socially responsible. The recent UNESCO Report on "Futures of Education" reinforces several of these principles, perspectives and priorities towards socially responsible higher education.

This policy brief addresses the themes oh Higher Education and the SDGs, Inclusion, and Data and Knowledge Production and is addresses to education leaders, teachers, students and communities interested in place-based, contextual education as well as inclusion and knowledge democracy.

1. Inclusion in Higher Education:

This section will touch on the sub-themes of Leaving no one behind: enabling vulnerable groups to enter, transit and complete higher education and the value of ethnic diversity and multiculturality in higher education.

1.1 Diversities of Knowledge Systems and Epistemologies

Supporting the theme of inclusion in Higher Education and central to the new discourse on social responsibility of HEIs 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).

Padayachee et al., in their essay, provide an exploration of a system of higher education based on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*:

> African indigenous knowledge systems are community–based knowledge systems that members of a culturally specific community have developed and used for centuries for shared livelihood and sustainability [...].

According to this holistic paradigm, the creation of a better society entails developing the individual along natural and ethical lines within the context of the collective, a vision embodied in the spirit of Ubuntu, which includes caring for one another's well-being with mutual support in ways that demonstrate that people are people through other people.

Comparing this African perspective with that of Gandhi, they suggest that Gandhi evolved his philosophy of learning – where head, heart and hands are united – when he lived in South Africa. According to Gandhi, a person was made of three constituents – the body, mind and spirit – and, thus, education must lead to a holistic development of the body, mind and spirit (UNESCO Chair, 2019). His perspective on education through life, in everyday life, resonates with Ubuntu's emphasis on coherence between people, nature and human solidarity. In a similar vein, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore proposed an intimate inter-linkage between the everyday life and livelihood of local rural communities and teaching-learning of students.

Each society has its own diverse meanings and concepts related to knowledge, its purposes and praxis. Higher education can act socially responsible by integrating and co-producing multiple forms of knowledge through respect for diverse epistemologies.

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.

1.2 Socially Inclusive, Seeking Diversity of Students and Academics

Another key principle of socially responsible higher education is the nature of inclusion it seeks to value and promote. 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.

Recognition of diversity and social inclusion in higher education is not merely an instrumental arrangement; social inclusion of diversity is acknowledged as providing the impetus to responsible teaching and research.

A common theme in social inclusion of students and academics is 'moving beyond educating the elites'. Social inclusion is achieved not merely through national policies, but also through deliberate efforts inside each institution. Many cases in this collection have demonstrated the need for both policy support and strong leadership of institutions of higher education. As has been argued in these chapters above, 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. 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.

2. A Better Governance in HE
2.1 Integrating Teaching, Research & Service

Speaking to the theme of Higher Education Governance, institutional design, faculty role allocations and resourcing patterns of HEIs since the Second World War resulted in the *fragmentation* of functions and structures serving the three core missions – teaching, research and service – of a university, leaving them disconnected from each other.
Some departments and centres focus on research; some faculty (mostly junior or graduate students) are assigned teaching responsibilities; and public engagement tasks linked to service to society are either 'out-sourced' to a partner or performed through extension departments. Teaching generally happens in the classroom, research in labs and service over weekends or during holidays.
Socially responsible higher education demonstrates the *integrated* nature of teaching, research and service, through actual practice. Students make meaningful contributions to societal needs while learning and gaining credits for the same. Faculty members are able to integrate enquiry while teaching students in the real world. Students gain satisfaction that their competencies are helping society. In the process, they improve their learning through contextual theorising. Thinking and doing are not artificially separated, but carry on simultaneously.

Those assigned the task of public engagement and service to society are not ghettoised in a corner or basement or faculty or discipline. Social workers alone need not be assigned such tasks; physicists too can be 'engaged' with society around them. Socially responsible higher education, in this integrated approach to its core functions, may create major realignments institutionally. Such an institutional realignment may create coherence for students, academics as well as communities. It supports better organisational effectiveness and supports a better response to dynamic contexts for HEIs. Holistic and coherent curricula, engaged and practical pedagogy and meaningful and usable research functions of a HEI may thus undergo systemic design.

2.2 Pluriversalism Replacing Universalism

A significant aspect of this new framework of social responsibility of higher education is recognition, appreciation and valuing of the pluriversal character of teaching, research and service. By calling it a university, there seems to be an emphasis, howsoever hidden, on universal nature of curriculum, teaching, research and faculties. The emphasis on universal tends to make higher education homogenous in concepts and theories, underlying world views, epistemologies and knowledge, disciplines and structures of admission, certification, graduation and accreditation.

These tendencies towards a 'universal' nature of higher education have given rise to international comparisons. Various forms of national and international ranking systems have been created to measure the performance of higher education institutions. Such a system of

ranking is actually causing higher education to become increasingly irrelevant to society (Hall and Tandon, 2021). Rankings are imposing further homogeneity, which is neither existent nor feasible, least of all desirable.

Not only do rankings tend to attempt false comparisons, the metrics are biased in favour of western knowledge systems, European institutional designs and American models of quality benchmarks, like publications in English language journals, intellectually and materially controlled through a small domain elite, located in such elite institutions.

The author of this chapter on rankings in the book, who identifies itself as "University Wankings", argues:

> However, there is a fundamental fault line running through this assertion, in that rankings articulate a singular, universal model of 'good' which provides a particular kind of university and a specific social group with leading status and an unassailable advantage. [...]
>
> Global university rankings can then be seen as an act of white supremacy in that they systematically establish and preserve the dominance of a tiny selection of elitist universities in the white majority global North. Those 'top' universities, too, are predominantly white, in terms of their staff and students, due to their particular positions within those countries.

Therefore, socially responsible higher education institutions are diverse in design, structure, models and methodologies, which 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.

3. Quality and Relevance of Programmes: Contextually Responsive, Locally Rooted, Place Based and Linguistically Plural

An important facet of the social responsibility of higher education is its contextual responsiveness. All institutions derive meaning of their purposes in a contextually responsive manner. Institutional culture is deeply influenced by local culture, even if it is designed to be insular. For most responsiveness, context matters, which touches on the WHEC sub-theme of "Diversification and flexibility of curriculum, programmes, and courses". In HEIs, what is taught, what is researched and what is served derive purpose from being responsive to the context. A university located in a mountainous region should be teaching geography and hydrology differently than one located near the ocean. Management education in a country with two- thirds of the workforce in small businesses should be undertaking research and teaching programmes predominantly covering small business ecosystem.

As Dr. Krawchenko, Dean of the Graduate School of Development from the University of Central Asia recently stated, we should locate universities where we need them the most. While 85% of universities are located in capital cities, they choose to locate their campuses in the poorest areas where it can be an engine for economic growth (UNESCO Chair and GUNi, 2021).

An example of such a contextually responsive nature of higher education is examining social responsibility of higher education in Peru by Bregaglio et al. highlighting the provisions of the New University Act (2014):

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.

However, most legal education in Peru has focussed only on providing the service of 'free legal aid' through legal clinics, a methodology they learnt from American universities and have been practicing since the 1980s. The new Act demands a contextually responsive higher education, and Law Schools in Peru could take up more urgent public interest matters, as the authors point out:

Considering the number of human rights issues that urgently need to be addressed in Peru – ranging as wide as the prison system, the protection of LGBT+ rights, adequate recognition of the right to identity – we would posit that law schools should aim towards establishing public interest clinics.

Given the vast indigenous population in Peru, with a long history of displacement from their natural resources, it is also noteworthy that laws that affect indigenous communities, as well as indigenous legal systems, are not really the focus of teaching and research in Peru. While the new Act creates the mandate for a contextually responsive higher education, Peru's law schools have yet to embrace it more fully. This is an interesting case, where national policy is far more supportive of socially responsible higher education, while actual practice of curriculum, pedagogy and research are yet to operationalise the same in both letter and spirit.

The most significant shift towards local language in a higher education system happened in Qatar recently. Describing this shift in the chapter, Belkhiria et al. have narrated a powerful story of recent shift to Arabic (from English) as the medium of admission, teaching and research in Qatar University across all disciplines and faculties, other than science and engineering. As the analysis presented in their essay has demonstrated, in less than 5 years of the shift to Arabic language, the percentage of local Qatari students increased substantially. In addition, the authors argue that:

> Promoting Arabic as the language of learning and teaching throughout all educational stages will allow students to "build a linguistic reservoir" that is essential to knowledge production, internalisation of social and cultural values, and the preservation of identity.

From this vantage point, Qatari experience shows that use of local languages in teaching and research can demonstrate social responsibility in many profound ways:

> Hence, educational institutions have a vital role in sustaining such missions, especially in areas that cultivate social responsibility, identity formation and cultural development, in addition to academic success in the native languages.

This approach, rooted in local language and culture, to academic research and knowledge dissemination is a manifestation of socially responsible higher education.

How do we increase local knowledge production in developing countries? It is a big challenge. As Dr. Krawchenko highlighted in a recent presentation (UNESCO Chair and GUNi, 2021), publications should be translated to local languages and made available.

3.1 An Example of Contextually Relevant Teaching and Research: Pankaj Mittal's on Social Responsibility (India Book launch):

An example of contextually relevant teaching and research can be seen at the Centre for Society, University, Interface and Research, established at Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, which was the first State Womens University in North India. This centre focuses on building the connection between society and the university. The curriculum at the university is designed in a way where 50% is taught at the university and 50% is in the field.

The Centre helps in embedding the principles of social responsibility across the entire curricula. The Centre offers innovative courses in three areas viz: Integrated Energy Resource Management, Microfinance Practices and Folk Medicine which are taught in a cross-disciplinary manner. In addition, the centre initiates research programs with students for developing low-cost innovative technologies for the rural folk living in the nearby communities. Students at the university work on technological innovations based on the needs and occupations of their local community. Past innovations include "Upla" or cow dung cake making machine since cow dung cakes are usually made by rural women in that area. Such innovations, when successfully implemented with the communities provide ownership among them towards the newly-found solutions.

4. The Futures of Higher Education: HE for the Global Common Good

In order to understand and encourage the use of this framework of social responsibility of higher education, it is important to return to the basic question: what is the purpose of higher education in society? If the answer to that question is to promote personal fulfillment, 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 will not be very appropriate, indeed. 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? The current pandemic has shaken its roots. International student mobility, and resultant recruitment of fancy, fees paying international students, are unlikely to privilege universities of North America, Europe and Australia, in the future. Globalisation, in its current form, is already shaken. Preparation of knowledge solutions and talent for local economy and society is likely to be the 'new normal'. The present 'scientific' paradigm of instrumental rationality treated ecological contexts as 'unlimited resources to be exploited forever'. The colonial project deliberately 'killed' local, indigenous and diverse knowledge systems and epistemologies. That journey of epistemicide is now haunting humanity, and COVID-19 is an imminent manifestation of this phenomenon. As stated by Hall and Tandon (2020),

> If the futures of education are to promote universal learning to become, then education has to be seen as serving the public and the well-being of humanity as a whole. [...] It is the public purpose of education alone that will prepare humanity for

sustainable futures. Such a commitment to the public purpose of education needs to be societally embedded and not merely dwell amongst 'educationists' alone. The perspectives and principles of knowledge democracy will help to embed this societal commitment in the futures of education.

It is time that all societies begin to 'reclaim' the public purposes of higher education. 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. 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 socially responsible higher education locally, and globally.

Conclusion

Today is the moment to seize for transforming the 'futures of higher education'. The decades of narrow economic focus of higher education teaching & research has fueled global inequality by converting knowledge as commercial products of production, trade & consumption by the global elites, for the global elites. The public scrutiny faced by research institutions and networks during the past two years of the pandemic have reinforced the above perception amongst many publics.

Five key actions are required towards such transformation by policy-makers, educational leaders, teachers, students and communities:

- For Policy-makers, we need to make Higher education for the global common a priority to build sustainable communities
- For Educational Leaders, we need to support ethnic, gender & multi-cultural Inclusion of students, teachers and learning materials
- For Teachers, we need to reconnect activities of teaching, research & civic missions for better cohesion and relevant education
- For Students, we need to learn to practice global citizenship to create the leaders of tomorrow
- For Communities, we need to create more opportunities for community-university engagement to support place-based, contextual education

With the integration of diverse epistemologies throughout these key actions, we are given the possibility of dreaming a decolonial future, ensuring that no one is left behind and creating a path to sustainable societies.

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