

Education for sustainable development: Re-imagining scholarships and research

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

Redressing the neglect of higher education in development

Research is associated with originality, independence, rigour and (often) an academic setting, but its role is often assumed to be self-explanatory. However, 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 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 them – the public included – in knowledge creation. The four 'scholarships' should not be separated or traded off, but treated as complementary.

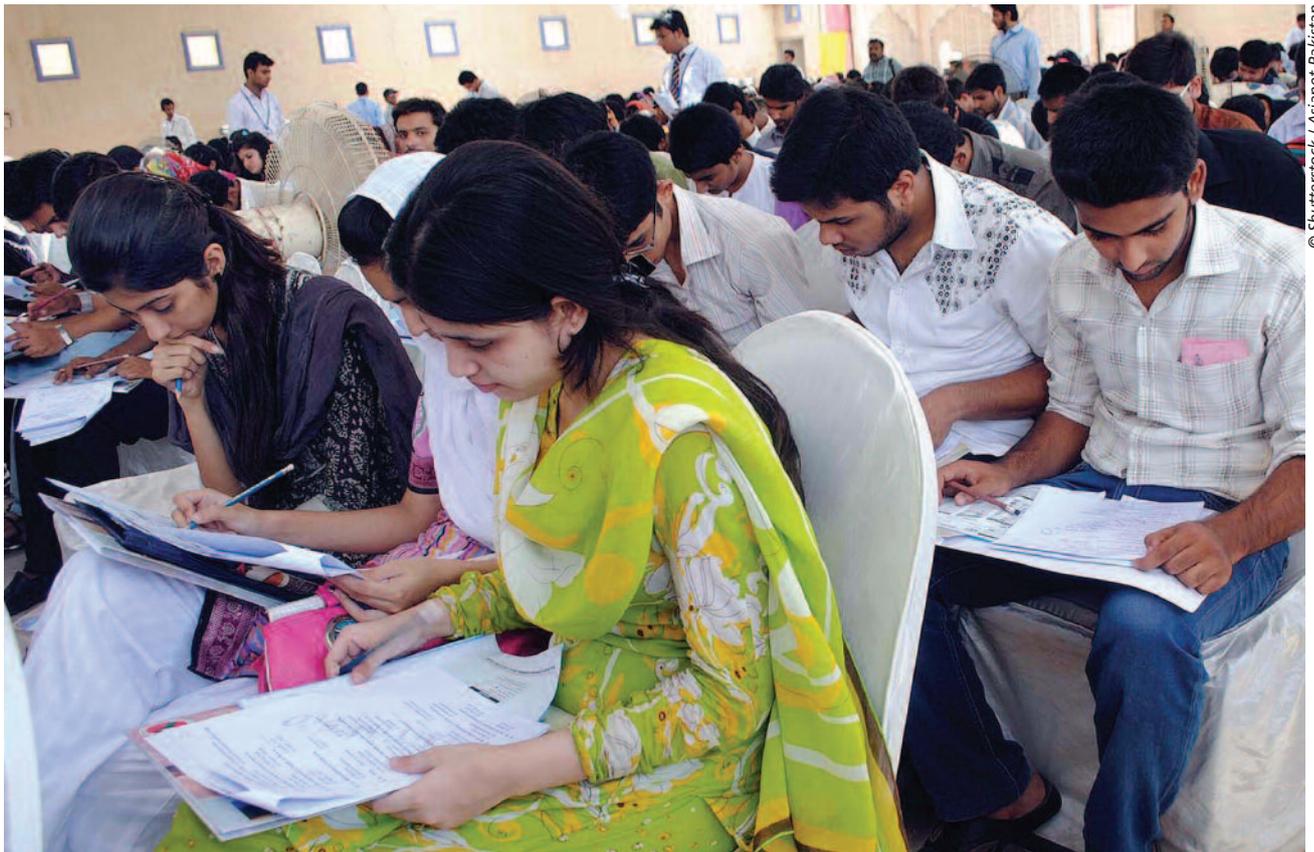
For the past several decades, the international development consensus has focused almost exclusively on primary education. Higher education was excluded from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; spanning 2000–15) agenda, whether in its own right or as a potential means to address the other MDGs. The limited approach to education has been criticised for its deleterious impact, endangering by extension the prospects for endogenous and sustainable development (Sawyer, 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, policy-makers, 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: p. 3).

However, the exact relationship between higher education and development remains unclear. A recent review (Oketch et al., 2014 – see page 35 in this volume) suggests that economic or 'human capital' perspectives predominate. 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 realisation of human rights through improvements in health, nutrition, gender equality, democratisation and the environment. The evidence is dispersed and further research is needed. Moreover, arguments for higher education typically 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.

Higher education and human rights

Former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson argues that human rights offer a form of ethical globalisation.¹ 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: p. 317) concurs that human rights have 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 'few 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: p. 318).



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Students sit entry exams for medical and engineering degrees in Hyderabad, Pakistan

Sustainable development is contested, involving complex interactions between science, politics, policy-making 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. 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' (OWG, 2013). Interdisciplinarity, the 'scholarship of integration', connects the aspirations for sustained inclusion, equity and human development. New interdisciplinary research enables human development and sustainability to be linked, using multi-dimensional development indicators like the Happy Planet Index¹. 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 is but insufficiently, accounted for, even in these progressive new measures (Khoo, 2013).

Ethical responses to globalisation

Higher education is experiencing 'hard times', as the much longer established values and purposes of education and knowledge themselves are also 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, and (as if this weren't enough) promoting social equity and inclusion. The contradictions between these are considerable, as the political pressures are to rationalise, downsize and increase centralised control. Pressures for international competitiveness have led governments away from 'decentralisation' agendas and towards those of managerialism (performance management, market positioning). Research agendas increasingly eschew traditional scholarly values in favour of 'impact' and prestige ('world class' status). Economic crisis in the global North has also been part of the shift from a 'demand-side' approach, which sees the development of educational infrastructure as a public investment, towards a deregulated 'supply-side' approach. To question what education is broadly *about* and what it is *for* is valid, but this call for better quality and better integrated research, not less.

In response to the disenchanting versions of accountability advanced by management, researchers and educators could counterpose human rights concepts of answerability and constructive accountability (Freedman, 2003).

Markets and economic growth offer only one perspective on progress and development. Equality, human rights and human development provide valid alternative perspectives (Walby, 2009). These are inter- and trans-disciplinary, drawing together different ideas and debates within development studies, law, gender, food,



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Pharmacy students at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur develop new equipment to manufacture drugs

health, education, environmental and security studies. Debates about the meaning of development and the concerns with economic development, well-being and progress are taking place across the global South and North alike. The recent economic austerity and social crises in many developed economies has moved the debates beyond academic research and into the broader public realm. Global justice concerns and what may be called 'grounded global sensibilities' (Massey, 2009: p. 80; Munck, 2010) connect the different issues and disciplinary knowledges; the ethical extends 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.

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. 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-imagining of higher education in the current era of globalised and managed (dis-)engagement.

The challenges ahead

Those who hope that higher education will play a fuller role in realising 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 and competition between units, rather than integration. Media and political pressure often compound difficulties and disincentives by discouraging public support for academic freedom, and for critical and alternative scholarship. Finally, higher education institutions are usually far too preoccupied with problems with financing and relentless reforms to clarify what they stand for. Compliant and risk-averse versions of education prevail in such times.

Nevertheless, 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 the education and development sectors generally, and from the whole gamut of disciplines and professions represented at tertiary institutions. There is much that the North can learn *from*, and not just *about*, development in the South and it can take heart from their visions for more ethical, sustainable and human-centred versions of global higher education.



Umaru Musa Yar'adua University Katsina, Katsina State, Nigeria

Improving access to university education

The University's logo depicts a shield, an open book and a molecule. The molecule symbolises science and technology which is the University's focus for rapid scientific and technological development, while the open book symbolises the spirit of enquiry and research.



Senate building



Library



Faculty of
Science

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- Faculty of Humanities
- Faculty of Education
- Faculty of Law
- Faculty of Social Management Sciences

A project to develop the College of Medical and Health Sciences is ongoing.

Under these Faculties the University has 21 Departments, 35 undergraduate programmes and 14 postgraduate programmes. Currently, the University has 6,850 undergraduate students and 356 postgraduates with a total number of 907 academic and non-academic staff.

The University has a robust staff development programme and is committed to sending its staff, both academic and non-academic, for valuable training both within and outside Nigeria.

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- Directorate of Academic Planning
- Directorate of Information and Communication Technology
- Directorate of Physical Planning and Development
- Directorate of Health Services
- Centre for Renewable Energy and Research
- Entrepreneurship and Development Centre – an academic arm vested with the responsibility of training students in entrepreneurial skills.

Umaru Musa Yar'adua University has collaborative partnerships and linkages with some foreign institutions and has signed memoranda of understanding on scientific, educational and cultural research as well as staff training.

Vision

Umaru Musa Yar'adua University aspires to be one of the best Universities in Nigeria with an established reputation for high quality teaching and innovative learning delivery techniques and to be in full harmony with its host community as the formulator of its hopes and aspirations and the promoter of its core cultural and spiritual values.



Mission

The mission of the Umaru Musa Yar'adua University is to produce well-grounded, sound, God-fearing and entrepreneurially-minded graduates, equipped with problem-solving and other skills attuned to the demands of the 21st century environment, who can be self-employed, and whose skills and knowledge would accelerate community development in particular and nation building in general through the regular and distance education modes using information and communication technology as a tool, thereby widening access to higher education significantly.

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In producing, synthesising, communicating and extending knowledge, higher education plays a pivotal role in its democratisation. Gidley (2000: pp. 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 underpin attempts to solve the problems of the future. She contends that 'academics, 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: p. 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 where the quality of human lives, social justice and human freedom can be freely and authentically decided (Delanty, 2001).

Endnote

1 See: www.happyplanetindex.org.

i From *Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalisation Initiative* (no date), 'What is Ethical Globalisation?'. Available at: www.realizingrights.org [Accessed 5 July 2014].

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