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Article:

Viewpoint: 'The world is going to university': higher education and the prospects for sustainable development

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Abstract: The changing global higher education landscape has profound implications for development planning and practice, yet the relations between higher education and development have long been uncertain and contested. In this Viewpoint, we argue that the changing higher education landscape provides important opportunities to promote sustainable development.

Main Text:
In March 2015, The Economist noted that the rise in global tertiary education enrolment from 14% to 32% between 2002 and 2012 meant "The world is going to university". This expansion and internationalization of the Higher Education (HE) sector is driven by educational and economic motives (Haigh, 2008) and encompasses the global spread of knowledge production, the recruitment of overseas students for income generation, and the development of more globally-aware and internationalized curricula. These developments have important implications for international development debates, going beyond previous narrow concerns with universal primary education and thinking more broadly about questions of sustainability and development. They also allow us to revisit the nature and purpose of HE and whether the sector's expansion is solely aimed at strengthening individual competencies to participate in the global labour market (Wals, 2014) or if it can play a vital role in promoting sustainable human development and a planetary citizenship (Haigh, 2014).

The marginality of the HE sector within development agendas is echoed in academic engagements with education in the global South. For instance, during the period 2009-2014 the International Journal of Educational Development, whose remit is to "report new insight and foster critical debate about the role that education plays in development", only 36 out of 405 published articles (less than 9%) related to HE. Similarly, the Comparative and International Education Society bibliography shows less than 5% of catalogued journal articles are focused on the HE sector. As donors take an increased interest in supporting HE as a means of promoting development – and sustainable development in particular – there is a need for further research in this field to understand how HE-related interventions play out within specific national socio-economic, political and academic contexts (e.g. Hammett, 2012a, 2012b; Knight, 2012).

The link between education and both individual and societal socio-economic development is well established (Ansell, 2015), and is reflected through explicit inclusion in two Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and one Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Advocates for the importance of education for development have utilized human capital theory to support their arguments, leading to education being entrenched as a key policy concern for the promotion of economic development and social inclusion around the world (McGrath, 2010). As Brown and Lauder (1996: 1) identify, for policy makers "the quality of a nation's education and training system is seen to hold the key to future economic prosperity", with the quality and productivity of human capital seen as crucial factors in securing competitiveness and advantage in the global economy. However, the emphasis within policy implementation has been limited to a sub-section of education.

Development policy and energy has tended to focus on primary and basic education despite the 1976 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights calling for the progressive introduction of free secondary education and prospect for free tertiary education. Instead, development policies have privileged primary education through Education For All policies, driven by the concordats of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All and the MDGs (Palmer, 2006; Unterhalter, 2014). Key institutional donors argued that this focus would provide the best rate of return in terms of human capital development (Unterhalter, 2014).

The (economic) development outcomes of such education policies are not always simple and straightforward. Brown and Lauder (1996) outline a range of complex and, at times contradictory, interrelations between education and economic development, not least in relation to the functioning of educational markets and the role of education in a shifting economic developmental framework. McGrath (2010) highlights how increasing levels of education can influence population growth as well as enhancing state and governance capacity but at the same time can increase risks of psychological and physical violence, potential ideological indoctrination, and educational inflation. More broadly, education is also deployed as a tool of nation-building and citizen formation with a range of intended development outcomes including socio-economic, cultural and political dispositions and practices (Jones, 2012; Staeheli and Hammett, 2013; Zahar, 2012).

Research has shown that the benefits of universal free primary education have not materialized as expected, due to variable quality in primary education provision, a lack of skilled teachers, and the mismatch in educational attainment and (labour) market needs (Palmer, 2006). Further concerns have been expressed regarding the governmentality exercised over and through global education by organisations including the World Bank and UNESCO through target-setting and monitoring of learning outcomes that influence both the conceptualization of (higher) education for development as well as prioritizing the production of "self-governing subjects, amenable to neoliberal society", who are aspirational, and fit for the global knowledge-based economy (Ansell, 2015: 14; Carney et al., 2012). Furthermore, critics have argued that "the education MDG set the bar too low, giving governments few incentives for expanding good quality secondary, technical or higher education" (Unterhalter, 2014: 183). There is, therefore, a pressing need for a more holistic approach to education within development, one that addresses post-basic education and training – including higher education – as a key mechanism to promote poverty alleviation, enhance economic productivity, health indicators, state capacity, utilization of technological advances and participation in the global knowledge economy (Darkwah, 2013; Palmer, 2006; Jackman and Bynoe, 2014).

In many contexts a lack of highly qualified citizens continues to contribute to significant skills shortages and lack of institutional capacity to respond to and overcome serious developmental obstacles, both in relation to specific areas of expertise (such as civil and hydraulic engineers able to handle flood risks in Taiwan (Chou, 2012)) and to meet broader development goals in relation to health, sanitation, and technology (Unterhalter et al., 2013). Strengthening and expanding equitable access to quality HE is not only a key development challenge (Akoojee and Nkomo, 2011: 118), but should be viewed as a key sustainable development tool (Chou, 2012: 253).

Although debate continues over whether HE expansion in the global South is a tool for democratization and meritocratic equalisation, or of differentiation and elite formation/entrenchment (Haigh, 2008), the World Bank has argued since 2000 that HE should not be viewed as a luxury but rather a means of promoting participation and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Altbach, 2014; Morley et al., 2009). Failure to develop post-primary, and in particular tertiary, education in the global South limits development, hinders participation in the global knowledge economy, and contributes to international student and graduate migration to the detriment of these countries (Findlay and Cranston, 2015; Haigh, 2008; Lee and Koo, 2006). The increased emphasis on and assistance provided to the HE sector by development agencies – as well as the explicit inclusion of HE-related targets within the SDGS (Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", and Target 4.3: "by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university") – demonstrates a growing recognition of the importance of HE for sustainable economic and social development (Dickenson, 2013; Morley et al., 2009; Unterhalter, 2014; Walker et al., 2009).

Given the widespread recognition within OECD countries that HE institutions play a key economic role through expenditure on goods and services, provision of jobs, supplying a skilled workforce, and producing knowledge (Marginson, 2012), the inclusion of HE investment within dominant development agendas is overdue. Within the global South, the HE sector could begin to address the skills deficit and produce skilled individuals – and research – which would improve the effectiveness and

efficiency of both the private and public sectors, while also "playing an indispensable role in programmes of sustainable development" (Morley et al., 2009: 57). Indeed, many countries in the global South have invested in HE in order to "improve national economic development, to develop a well-educated citizenry, and to enhance national competitiveness" (Yu and Delaney, 2014: 2). More broadly, a vibrant HE sector is noted for stimulating economic growth by attracting direct foreign capital investment and international business, and contributing to national innovation systems (see Hazelkorn, 2015; Ischinger, 2009; Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Mahshi 2012). Greater investment has undoubtedly contributed to the increasing internationalisation of knowledge production and globalisation of HE. These endeavours have included the internationalisation of curricula (for example, business administration courses in Arab universities - see Ahmed, 2006), efforts towards regionalisation (for instance in Latin America - see Gomes et al., 2012), as well as through investments by the World Bank and UNESCO to promote collaborative projects and prioritise sustainable development (Altbach, 2012).

The globalisation of HE and its associated marketplace position within the global knowledge economy has also contributed to the emergence of global university ranking tables. These rankings, driven to a significant extent by Chinese efforts to develop their university sector along the lines of, and to compete with, US universities, demonstrate that while the HE sector is global, it remains dominated by the Anglo-American core and, more broadly, universities in the global North. Whilst acknowledging critiques of the methodologies involved in compiling the rankings, the Times Higher Education and QS ranking tables emphasise this Anglo-American dominance (see tables 1 and 2). According to the Times rankings, in 2011 there were 10 top-200 universities in developing countries (as defined in 2015 by the International Statistical Institute), a figure dropping to 8 in 2015, a collection dominated by institutions in China and Turkey. According to the QS rankings, there were 11 top-200 and 39 top-400 universities in developing countries in 2012, rising to 12 top-200 and 46 top-400 in 2015, with Chinese institutions featuring strongly.

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

Table 1: Times Higher Education top-200 ranked universities in 'developing countries' (from Times Higher Education World Rankings

(https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/), accessed 7th July 2015).

INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE

Table 2: QS top-400 ranked universities in 'developing countries' (from QS World University Rankings (http://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings), accessed 7th July 2015).

The influence of these rankings has been profound, causing many institutions around the world to realign their strategic priorities in order to improve their ranking status and to improve their global research footprint (Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Salmi, 2011; Wang, 2013); witness the shift in China from a Russian to US model HE system to compete more in the international HE market (Tapper, 2012), efforts to 'catch-up' amongst universities within members of Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (Wippel, 2013) and in South Africa (Hammett, 2012a), or to 'cope by copying' amongst institutions in parts of the Middle East (Hussain, 2015).

Integral to these trends has been the spreading dominance of a neoliberal view of HE as 'Higher Education Inc.' to borrow Haigh's (2008) phrase, entrenched in discourses from the World Bank and others, which positions the sector as promoting Western culturally-loaded education and developing productive citizens who can participate in the global labour market (Haigh, 2008, 2014). At this point, when HE is becoming increasing central to international development agendas and national development planning, it is important for development scholars and practitioners to ensure this centrality is not solely founded upon economic development. Rather, there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure HE works for a holistic vision of sustainable development.

Utilizing HE for development provides a context within which notions of sustainable development, and associated skills, research and practices, can be embedded with beneficial outcomes both for individuals and society, and local and internationally – including supporting innovative HE sector collaborations between the global North and South (Hunter, 2013). The establishment of an urban planning studio collaboration between Nairobi University and Columbia University, as well as the

Association of African Planning Schools to network planning schools across the continent and revitalise planning curricula so that planners are more responsive to local circumstances, demonstrate how investment in HE and associated collaborations can promote development (Klopp et al.,2014; Odendaal, 2012)

Further opportunities are afforded by a stronger focus on global higher/tertiary education in relation to realising the UNDP's priority of 'sustainable human development'. This agenda can be viewed through the broad frame of the UN's Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which sought "to emphasize the critical role of education in moving towards a more sustainable world" (Wals, 2014: 8) and stimulate positive social transformation. At the heart of this approach was a focus on three pillars of sustainable development: social development, economic growth and environmental protection, to be achieved in an inclusive and equitable way. This agenda has evolved to include and emphasise the role of HE for development (Wals, 2014), with UNESCO's 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century setting out that HE can develop "a more equitable, tolerant and responsible society" (Gacel-Ávila, 2005: 122) based upon an emphasis on participatory learning, attitudinal and behavioural change, and critical thinking linked to environmental concerns and notions of sustainability and collectivity.

Gacel-Ávila (2005), amongst others, has argued that promoting internationalised HE can develop a global consciousness amongst students, grounded in a recognition of the interdependence of societies, that engenders not only greater professional skills and increased employability, but also a disposition to promote and protect collective socio-economic and environmental goods. Haigh (2008: 430, 2014) takes this aspiration further, calling for "Planetary citizenship education [that] seeks a future sustainable in environmental, social and ethical terms" that draws upon education for sustainable development and democratic citizenship. Thus, in order to secure sustainable development, university graduates will be essential, as they will possess not only the skills and expertise required to deliver this goal (Unterhalter et al., 2013), but also the disposition towards a global sustainable citizenship.

There are signs that efforts towards the integral positioning of sustainable

development within the HE sector are taking root in the global South. These may be embedded through innovative and sustained institutional collaborations both between institutions in the global North and global South, and between institutions in the global South. Examples include: bi-lateral links between German universities and those in Oman, Turkey and elsewhere, the collaborations noted above involving the Association of African Planning Schools (Odendaal, 2012) as well as Nairobi and Colombia universities (Klopp et al., 2014), and the institutionalization of sustainable development within key HE institutions such as the Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman and the UAE University in the United Arab Emirates (Hussain, 2015). The introduction and appointment of 666 UNESCO-endowed Chairs, including a number focused on sustainable development, across the globe to develop international collaborations which contribute to societal development is another manifestation of these practices, along with the UN University's Research Transfer Centres and the UniTwin programme run by UNESCO. More widely, ideas of sustainable development within HE are becoming institutionalized through efforts towards 'greening' campuses and include both 'bolt-on' and 'built-in' curricula content aimed at contributing to sustainable living (Wals, 2014). In the case of the Sultan Qaboos University and the UAE University, their position as the sole ranked university in their host country allows them to play a more central and influential role in attempts to advance sustainable development within national planning agendas.

As this viewpoint has shown, although the HE sector is accepted to be a key component to developed countries' productivity and success in the global knowledge-based economy, the development potential of HE in the global South is only belatedly being recognized. Support for the HE sector in the global South can play a vital role in promoting development as well as providing a basis for inculcating sustainable development at the heart of these agendas. However, the pressures to enhance institutional standing in world university ranking tables and to ensure graduates are appropriately trained to be competitive in the global labour market are often in tension with sustainable development and social justice goals (see Haigh, 2008; Wals, 2014). Further research and understanding is thus needed to ascertain how best the HE sector can support development agendas and outcomes, including developing greater understanding of how individual HE institutions function and are engaged with and influenced by the globalization of HE (see Leal Filho, 2015; Mahshi, 2011; Portes,

2011; der Wende, 2013). International development scholarship is well positioned to develop such insights and to critically reflect on the opportunities for the HE sector to contribute to meeting the SDGS while recognizing the pressures placed on Universities to compete within a HE market-place.

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