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New challenges and emerging roles for human and social development

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**“A lifetime may not be enough to bring justice, but the young will do so in the future. Peace will be the product of education and not of violence.”
Rigoberta Menchú**

The government and the public often view universities as no more than generators of wealth and training centres for key professionals of the future. This attitude does a disservice to the educational contribution of universities, as it has gradually eroded the notion of universities as cultural projects that serve wider society or as institutions that work in the public interest.

The third report of the **Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI)** analyses the contribution made by higher education to human and social development in the context of globalisation. This study is aimed at broadening the vision of the vital social function performed by higher education institutions in providing a space for debate, proposals and reflection on the role of knowledge in society.

Universities are currently immersed in one of the most interesting and challenging periods in their history, since globalisation offers a series of major opportunities but also raises serious problems for the future by questioning the feasibility of what should be the guiding value of higher education: serving the common good, in an era in which the definitions of "good" and "common" have become increasingly unclear. The changes brought about by globalisation are so pronounced that we now need to reconsider the relationship between higher education and the society around it.

Resources are being channelled into education and knowledge creation like never before: so much so, in fact, that we are embarking on the creation of what is known as the knowledge society.

Against this backdrop, universities remain the key institutions in producing and disseminating knowledge and constitute the backbone of economic and social development. Higher education is responsible for training future professionals who will occupy strategic positions in society and the labour market. Consequently, it plays a fundamental and decisive role in transferring the knowledge, values and skills that it imparts into the public domain.

Present and future challenges for the role of higher education in the context of globalisation

According to **Philip G. Altbach**, director of the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, universities throughout the world are increasingly being asked to maintain their key functions in the face of budget restrictions, which leads to a deterioration in the level of service offered. It seems that there is neither the time nor the money that would enable universities to consider new approaches to education or social involvement. In this climate, universities with extensive research programmes have been most adversely affected by the need to find new sources of funding, and have found themselves forced to modify their operational structures considerably.

The government and the public often view universities simply as generators of wealth and training centres for key professionals of the future, but can this attitude produce tangible benefits for higher education and for society as a whole? Universities have been forced to sacrifice aspects of their essential role as centres that foment intellectual and cultural

development, social analysis and comment. At the same time, they have become increasingly tied to the practical needs of society, dictated by governments and markets (this is particularly true in the case of private institutions). Altbach warns that “societies which ignore the multiple purposes and functions of universities will be very weak, since universities are driving forces behind the creation of wealth and knowledge but must also work towards humanistic and cultural objectives and individual needs”.

Experts believe that universities have the following functions:

- Academic-professional. Universities are responsible for the education of a sizeable proportion of the workforce.
- General education. University curricula across the world have traditionally been based on specialised knowledge in specific disciplines and have not included a more general type of learning. The role of this type of education is currently being debated, and it has already been incorporated into university curricula in some countries.
- Preserving and disseminating knowledge.
- Intellectual centres for knowledge creation.
- Internationalisation. Universities are now national and international institutions due to the increasing number of partnerships and the general trend towards globalisation.
- Driving forces behind economic development.
- Instruments of social mobility.

Expansion was the overriding force in higher education in the second half of the 20th century and will continue to play an important role in the new millennium. In most developed countries the gross enrolment rate in higher education has risen from 10% to over 50%. This general expansion has not only increased the number of students but also had a profound impact on the number and variety of academic institutions offering higher education.

The public/private debate

One of the most serious debates about the role of higher education in the last few decades has focused on whether it can be considered a public good—one that adds value to a society by educating individuals who will go on to become productive citizens—or a private good, which serves primarily individual interests by giving those with higher education qualifications a better quality of life and higher social status.

In recent years, the belief that higher education is a private good has become increasingly widespread and higher education budgets in many countries have been frozen or even reduced. Public academic institutions have been asked to generate a rising proportion of their funding by increasing enrolment fees, enhancing their commercial profiles, and offering various services to the general market. In some cases, institutions have introduced loans and other financing programmes to reduce the financial burden on students. The argument that the State does not have the financial power to provide universal access to higher education is debatable. Against these developments, most countries have transferred a sizeable proportion of their costs to the students.

At the same time, the growing privatisation of higher education has limited the possible functions of the university system. In many countries, public universities receive only a very small proportion of their funding from government bodies. This movement towards privatisation has drawn focus away from the traditional purposes of university education and placed more importance on other activities with greater potential to generate income. As such, the functions of universities are increasingly conditioned by market forces.

Globalisation and markets: the challenges facing higher education

According to a study by **Deepak Nayyar**, Professor of Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (India), the diminishing influence of the State and the growing importance of market demands have changed the nature of society and have an increasing impact on higher education. Education conceived as a business activity leads to neither economic development nor progress, says Nayyar. For this reason, higher education policies should be focused on stimulating development, minimising risks and making the most of the opportunities offered by globalisation and international markets.

Nayyar argues that markets with an unregulated and unrestricted influence on higher education can have a detrimental effect on its quality. The World Trade Organization and the General Agreement on Trade in Services have major repercussions on higher education and should be taken into account at all times. Nayyar concludes that markets and globalisation should not be allowed to exert a controlling influence over higher education.

The emerging roles of higher education

The educational purpose

According to **Peter Taylor**, researcher and Head of Graduate Programmes at the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex, higher education institutions have reached a critical moment in their evolution as local and global producers and disseminators of knowledge. Given that education plays an increasingly important role in creating and transmitting a complex network of knowledge and power relations at all levels of society, we urgently need to address the question of its overall purpose and of how to make the best possible use of the means placed at its disposal for carrying out this purpose. Education should be used to transform rather than transmit. Thus, Taylor concludes, teaching at university level should focus less on memorising and accumulating knowledge and more on helping students to develop skills and competences and to acquire a critical awareness of the world around them.

The change that Taylor advocates could be brought about by introducing new areas of study, increasing the cross-disciplinary nature of study programmes, and reducing the disparities in progress between different disciplines. This leads us to consider the feasibility of a scenario in which all higher education students would be affected by curriculum changes and traditional areas of study such as the sciences or humanities would form part of problem-orientated curricula more closely linked to real international concerns such as citizenship, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, ethical values, understanding, and sustainable development. According to Taylor, this scenario is a real possibility, and many higher education institutions across the world are already working towards it.

The following challenges must be addressed if a more cross-disciplinary culture is to be introduced:

- Universities must help academic staff to develop a teaching approach based on uncertainty and specific problems.
- Company executives must recognise the importance of helping their employees to apply more holistic knowledge and practices, which will help to legitimise this form of learning.
- Schools at the lowest levels of the education system should prepare students for more cross-disciplinary forms of learning and study to facilitate the successful transition to higher education.

For **Richard Bawden**, Professor Emeritus at the University of Western Sydney, the members of the academic community must act as facilitators of improvements in human conditions through intellectual, moral, aesthetic and even spiritual development. Bawden believes that higher education must be channelled in such a way as to combine the most appropriate aspects of human knowledge for tackling the issues that define the era in which we live. In his opinion, the basic educational premise of higher education institutions should be to facilitate progressive, reflective, critical and transformational learning that leads to a greater awareness of the need for responsible models according to which individuals and groups can learn to live, exist, and evolve.

The role of research

Hebe Vessuri, Director of the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research, maintains that we cannot be certain that research and higher education represent the clearest paths towards development. Indeed, Vessuri claims that in the most fragile countries with insufficient capabilities and a flawed basic infrastructure—that is, countries whose political and social institutions are inefficient and unstable—science and technology have not only been unable to reduce existing social inequalities, but have in fact broadened the social and economic divide between the educated and the uneducated.

However, this is not to say that poor countries should disregard the importance of higher education or of science and technology. What it does reveal is that research capabilities with no clear social direction or supervision, and isolated from other basic aspects of social and moral responsibility, cannot fulfil their potential for improving the quality of life of the general population.

For Vessuri, globalisation as we know it today is a fundamentally uneven process that, despite producing advantages and risks in all cases, is less successful in developing countries and institutions. The figures provided by Vessuri make this abundantly clear: more than 80% of the funding allocated to science and universities in 2000 was spent in high-income countries. In total, North America and Europe contributed 95% of the doctoral theses in the world and 75% of the research articles published. There are only 94.3 scientific researchers per million inhabitants in the least developed countries, in comparison with 313 in developed countries and 3,728 in the world's richest nations.

"The scientific community's unwillingness to assume social responsibilities cannot be sustained, as it leads to science that is out of control, conformist and unaware", states Vessuri.

Charas Suwanwela, of Chulalongkorn University, claims that different societies require different forms of knowledge and research. The social and political contribution of knowledge should take into account the unique characteristics and state of development of each society. Universities in developing countries must produce their own competitive research and act as dependable social agents, which entails responding to the needs of the people that they represent and taking an active role in the fight for human rights and social justice.

Sheila Jasanoff, from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, underlines that the 21st century should be a period of critical examination of advances in science and technology. Universities, she argues, should also be responsible for promoting a critical discourse through which societies can reflect continuously on how best to apply these advances.

Social engagement

Rajesh Tandon, President of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, explains that interaction between higher education institutions and civil society is under-developed and poorly conceptualised. Citizenship and democratic governance are the pillars of human and social development, but what role has higher education played in the discourse on human and social development in the last fifty or sixty years? What functions have higher education institutions adopted in the new fields of human and social development?

Some higher education institutions have responded to these opportunities by opening new centres for gender and environment studies, among other disciplines. Other institutions have introduced these subjects into their graduate and postgraduate programmes, while some universities have opened new lines of research into these emerging issues related to human development. However, Tandon points out that the general reaction of higher institutions across the world to these crucial considerations has been largely insufficient.

To what can we attribute the divide between higher education institutions and major contemporary issues such as human and social development? How true a reflection of the real situation is the common image of the university as an ivory tower that stands apart from the rest of society? The most widely debated question in relation to this issue concerns the way in which universities can extend the results of education and research to society as a whole.

Higher education institutions aim to help the communities around them by directly transmitting knowledge and experience. This practice is more common in North America, where students participating in community engagement programmes undertake placements in companies or other organisations in the immediate community. Many students believe that these placements are beneficial to their academic courses and professional training.

In many cases, the insularity of higher education institutions has isolated them from new, practice-based sources of knowledge, particularly social movements, civil security

organisations, and groups of experts on various aspects of human and social development. The main challenge to which higher education institutions must now respond, says Tandon, is to identify contemporary sources of advanced information on human and social development.

Institutional development

Teboho Moja, Professor of Higher Education at New York University, explains that government initiatives for higher education reform should focus on ensuring that universities respond to the needs of their societies and provide a platform upon which countries can base their competitiveness in the context of globalisation.

The challenge facing higher education institutions is to establish a balance between the effort put into economic development and the effort put into human and social development, says Moja. The fundamental mission of these institutions should be to cover national requirements against a background of serious problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, terrorism, disease, and ongoing national conflicts. Moja believes that global strategies are required and that universities should aim to produce a new breed of intellectuals who are capable of addressing major international issues.

In addition, Moja states that higher education institutions must assume active roles in processes that foster a culture of peace and conflict resolution by creating and supplying information on these issues.

Moja points out that, in a world in which globalisation has transformed English into a *lingua franca*, the work carried out by universities to conserve the languages and cultures that they represent is fundamental, since if higher education institutions do not accept responsibility for this task, it is unlikely that any other social institution will do so either.

The report also describes the thoughts of **Deane Neubauer** and **Victor Muñoz**, who suggest that, despite the negative outlook, history has shown that higher education institutions are capable of adapting to far-reaching social changes. The speed of globalisation, they claim, challenges universities to test their capacity for adjustment.

Delphi poll

The GUNI Secretariat consulted 214 key experts in higher education, including university leaders, policy-makers and other social agents from 80 countries, to obtain their views on the principal trends, issues and opinions related to the new challenges and emerging roles of higher education in human and social development throughout the world.

The results of the poll show that the vast majority of international experts believe higher education must play an active role in facilitating human and social development. Participants identified several priority issues, including the reduction of poverty, sustainable development, the incorporation of critical thought and ethical values into the globalisation process, and the improvement of governability and participatory democracy.

Most of the proposals highlight the need to improve the flow of dialogue between universities and society regarding the type of higher education that is required, the ways in which it should be adapted to the local community, and the nature of the civic engagement of higher education institutions. The most commonly identified measures for implementing these proposals focused on renewing university curricula, improving teacher training, restructuring the funding and governance mechanisms of higher education institutions, and facilitating equal access to higher education for all social groups.

The experts agree that the main attribute acquired by current university students is the ability to work in a competitive professional environment. However, they predict that the main attribute acquired by future students will be the capacity to adapt to and thrive in changing technological environments. Current opinion also suggests that multiculturalism and a focus on innovation will be among the key areas promoted by universities in the coming years.

Concern was expressed about the future role of universities within a society in which a growing number of agents and parties are in a position to influence the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The experts stressed the importance of dialogue and collaboration between universities and other sectors of society—particularly with those involved in information and knowledge management—as a means of maintaining public control over fundamental knowledge for human and social development.

Balance

Higher education can play a key role in human and social development on the international scale and in different regions, each of which have specific characteristics and require different approaches. If higher education is channelled in the right way, it can be used to address major world issues such as poverty, the abuse and denial of human rights, the strengthening of democracy, conflict resolution, peace building, environmental protection, and the preservation and extension of human rights. Universities and other higher education institutions are in a position to examine these complex problems and to help define innovative solutions. They must develop a prospective vision of the different regional scenarios, of the alternative solutions to ongoing problems, of the political dimension of these problems, and of the capacity to move forward into an uncertain future working in collaboration with international networks.

All regions are in agreement that future strategies and actions should focus on designing pathways and methods that will guide higher education towards a balance between economic development, on the one hand, and human and social development, on the other.

There is consensus that sustainable development cannot be achieved without human and social development. The global strategies—in addition to specific regional plans—proposed and unanimously approved by the authors of the regional articles suggest the following ways in which higher education can foment human and social development: by creating a meritocratic system of admission to higher education programmes for individuals from all regions and backgrounds; by reinforcing the critical function of higher education and supporting academic freedom; by developing higher education systems that are adapted to the needs of society; by strengthening the contribution of higher education to other levels of the education system; by diversifying higher education models; by carrying out research into sustainable development; by ensuring gender equality in the higher education system; by strengthening the profile of higher education as a public service and a public good (it is considered that private higher education can play a positive role); by harnessing the growing globalisation of higher education as a tool for consolidating international cooperation; and by maintaining a culture of peace.

The GUNI

The Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) is a global network made up of over 120 members from the five continents. These members include the UNESCO Chairs in higher education, higher education institutions, research centers and networks related to higher education. GUNI was set up in 1999 by UNESCO, the United Nations University (UNU) and the Technical University of Catalonia (UPC), which hosts its secretariat, to follow up the agreements taken at the World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) held in Paris in 1998.

The conference programme and further information can be found at <http://www.gunirmies.net/k2008/>

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