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A Higher Calling for Higher Education

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Education and knowledge resources are more available today than ever before. However, humanity's two main conflicts—coexistence with nature and coexistence with each other—remain unresolved. We need a new conception of human progress that recognizes the interdependence of the economic, social, political, and environmental spheres. To achieve this goal in theory and in practice, higher education institutions, now mainstays of the prevailing economic system, must become agents of progressive social change. This requires rethinking the mission and practice of higher education, from curricula to research, as well as how higher education institutions interact with society, from the local to the global level.

Introduction

Universities play a key part in shaping civilization and thus bear a significant intergenerational responsibility. They are responsible for providing students with a knowledge of the past while preparing them to be critical, open-minded, and creative contributors to contemporary society. The higher purpose of higher education is to go beyond helping students to develop the skills necessary to earn a livelihood, to facilitating ethical awareness, fostering critically engaged citizens, and imbuing all professions with a sense of the common good. As Sjur Bergan has eloquently explained, we need a higher education that “educates for the kind of society in which we would wish to live, not just for the kind of economy we would like to have.”¹ Students should graduate with a keen understanding of—and desire to participate in—the collective project of building inclusive, just, peaceful, and sustainable societies. If universities are to fulfill this mission, they must reconsider how the creation, distribution, and use of knowledge, as well as the relationship between knowledge and society, affect and are affected by our aspirations for a better world.

We need a new proactive and innovative conception of the calling of higher education.

Over the past few decades, the advance of scientific and technological knowledge has increasingly outpaced our ability to recognize and understand its implications. This heightens the urgency for higher education institutions (HEIs) to critically engage in intellectual debates about our collective future, to look more deeply at the social and environmental implications of the advancement of knowledge, and to increase the resources invested in examining the impact of science and technology on society.² Knowledge interacts reciprocally with democracy, intercultural relations, well-being, human rights, peace-building, and social organization. Deepening our understanding of the interplay between knowledge and society can therefore help to develop consciousness and to cultivate the sense of global community that facilitates social innovation, and the innovation that cultivates a sense of global community.³

As centers of knowledge generation and training, HEIs are located at the nexus of the local and the global, giving them considerable access to and influence over processes of social change. Although many academics are actively engaged in the task of social transformation, HEIs have generally not been at the center of debates about how to renew the world of ideas in order to respond to the crises and developments transforming our world.⁴ Doing so would require transcending both the paradigm of the “ivory tower” dominant some decades ago and that of the “market-oriented university” prevalent today. We need a new proactive and innovative conception of the calling of higher education for a Great Transition to a more equitable and sustainable world.

Interdependence is the key feature of an emerging holistic paradigm of human dynamics on Earth.

World Context

Education and knowledge resources have never been more available than they are today. In the last few decades, science and technology have seen spectacular advances, and educational attainment worldwide has reached historic highs. However, humanity's two major challenges—coexistence with nature and coexistence with each other—remain unresolved. Contemporary crises attest to the serious problems humankind faces in this century: climate change, food shortages, and economic recessions, as well as poverty, pandemics, armed conflicts, global inequality, human rights abuses, transnational terrorism, mass migrations, and intercultural misunderstanding. Globalization, while opening up new opportunities, has also laid bare the inequities and limits of the current system. The social, political, and economic frameworks that shaped our recent past are insufficient for understanding and acting in the present. They are even more inadequate for transcending the current development paradigm and building the foundation for a better future.

Massive global integration over the past two decades has made clear the *interdependence* of all spheres of human activity: we inhabit a single planetary ecosystem made up of a broad range of social-ecological subsystems. This interdependence is evident horizontally through the impact of each area of human activity—economic, social, environmental—on all others, as well as vertically through the interrelation of diverse scalar levels, from local to global. Interdependence is the key feature of an emerging holistic paradigm of human dynamics on Earth. It requires a new understanding of reality, new approaches to progress and prosperity, and new forms of social organization and collective action. International leaders have already begun to recognize the interdependence of the economic, social, and environmental realms and the need to address them simultaneously in the recently adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This global picture calls for a new forms of governance that can effectively manage issues of global concern and rise above state-centric forms of multilateral governance. The international order based on autonomous nation-states is ill-adapted to today's challenges, necessitating a reconsideration of the structure of governance at local, national, regional, and global levels, and cross-linkages between them. The demand for governance solutions without historical precedent adds both complexity and urgency to the task ahead.

Integral to this new way of thinking must be a revised concept of progress that goes beyond the post-industrial and neoliberal status quo. Money, which is at most an intermediate goal in achieving happiness, has become for many the final, unquestioned goal of human activity. The identification of material goods and

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consumption with happiness fails to recognize that human progress, in its higher aspirations, becomes a search for human realization. Our modern society fails both to understand deep human aspirations and to offer paths to pursue them.

To meet such challenges, we must re-examine the foundation of our globalized world in order to open new horizons of understanding and action. The current crisis of civilization cannot be overcome by simply repairing the old engine. It is time to rethink civilization itself.⁵

Is higher education up to the challenge? Not in its current form. Some argue that HEIs primarily impart information and knowledge that fit within existing paradigms, even as these paradigms themselves have become unreliable and open to question.⁶ HEIs have been too focused in recent decades on serving short-term goals of economic performance and national competitiveness in the context of a socioeconomic system that prioritizes the instrumental value of knowledge and technology in the pursuit of growth. The role of higher education should be to promote the common good, at a time when what we understand by “good” and by “common” can be highly contested.⁷ HEIs are serving a failing system in need of reinvention and are losing the capacity to engage in critical reflection and advance ways of thinking and acting that go beyond their immediate mandates. In an increasingly individualistic and consumerist society, social responsibility gets lost in the noise of markets, financial metrics, rankings, and competition.

Debates about challenges in higher education tend to look inward, focusing on such issues as internationalization, autonomy and governance, quality and recognition, academic career paths, student recruitment, financing, access, and delivery. But to think incisively about how HEIs must evolve to meet the needs of a rapidly changing world, we have to look outward—analyzing the needs of society, questioning common assumptions, and articulating proactive solutions. HEIs need to “learn to read reality,” that is, understand the wider impacts of their actions and the costs of what they are *not* doing at a time when societal transition is urgently needed.⁸ Higher education has been one of the largest contributors to social advancement and has played a significant role in building post-industrial societies. However, the role and purpose of higher education need to be reoriented to contemporary challenges. Higher education offers a major arena for ongoing social transformation, but in order to be transformative, it must first transform itself.

A number of questions arise. What roles are HEIs playing in local and global spheres, and what impacts are they having? What are the implications of *glocality*—simultaneous local and global awareness and engagement—for teaching, learning, and research? What are the implications of major initiatives such as the UN Global Agenda and the corresponding SDGs for higher education?

During a recent discussion on social responsibility, a university rector claimed to me that higher education is socially responsible by virtue of its very existence. By contrast, some scholars believe higher education has contributed to today's social and environmental problems. As David Orr puts it, without significant changes, education may end up equipping people to become simply "more effective vandals of the earth."⁹ He proposes an "educational 'perestroika'... beginning with the admission that much of what has gone wrong with the world is the result of education."

The concept of social responsibility is not new to HEIs, which have always been charged with advancing the public good. Now, though, it is important to reconsider the social role of colleges and universities in light of the interrelation of the local and the global. From a deep analysis of the complex constellation of societal needs at every level, we will be able to rethink the current role of knowledge and HE in society. What kinds of knowledge should our educational systems emphasize? How do we prepare people to understand and live in contemporary society and to actively participate in its positive transformation? What ethics and values should we transmit in the educational process?

HEIs have been under increasing pressure to play an active role in fostering economic growth.

Recent Trends in Higher Education

Over the past few decades, higher education has changed significantly.¹⁰ Although systems vary worldwide, several patterns can be discerned. Most notable is the increase in demand, with world net enrollment in higher education increasing from 94 million in 1999 to 198 million in 2013. This massive expansion has resulted in a number of outcomes: the inability of the state to finance the expansion and, correspondingly, the emerging importance of the market; the rapid increase of private institutions, including for-profit providers; the diversification of funding sources and cost-sharing mechanisms; the internationalization of higher education and the rise of cross-border provision; and the growing importance of rankings.

In most countries, the expansion of enrollment has not been matched by a corresponding expansion of state financing. This reduction in per student spending has led to increased institutional competition for resources, students, and research funding from the state and the private sector, allowing the imperatives of the market and the demands of corporate funders to shape education and research agendas.¹¹ This orientation was reinforced by the adoption of the Global Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) in the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995.

Facing limited resources from the state, HEIs have been under increasing pressure to play an active role in fostering economic growth in order to "earn" the funding they receive. This has transformed traditional academic values, producing an economic mindset in which money sets priorities. The emphasis on technological innovation,

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seen as the primary driver of economic development, has given far greater weight to calls for public support of technology-oriented programs and facilities, often at the expense of the humanities.

At the same time, there has been a hotly contested debate about whether or not higher education is a public good. Whether or not we treat HE as a public good has a direct bearing on the future of universities' role in society. Issues such as financing, accountability, quality assurance, and the output of the entire system differ greatly depending on the understanding of the nature of higher education. Those who view higher education as a public good argue that it adds value to society as a whole by educating students who will go on to become productive citizens, thereby enriching both the economy and the culture. Opponents argue that higher education should be considered a private good, since its benefits, such as an increased earning potential, accrue mainly to the graduates themselves. If higher education is a private good, then those who benefit should pay for it. If, on the other hand, higher education is mainly a public good, then society has a responsibility to provide its financing.

The fundamental issues in the debate about whether higher education is a public or private good are independent of the forms of provision or even profitability. The label "public" is not always a guarantee of a genuine public service. Similarly, the label "private" may include both institutions with commercial goals and institutions not directly under state control that offer a genuine, not-for-profit public service. Regardless of the provider, the important questions are what is provided, under what conditions, and with what social results.

In recent years, private good advocates have prevailed to a significant degree. As a result, higher education budgets in many countries have been reduced, and new cost-sharing mechanisms have been introduced. Changes in the way costs are shared can take several forms, including the introduction of tuition fees where they did not previously exist and the raising of fees where they did. Shifting the cost burden can also entail the freezing or reduction of student grants or student loan subsidies.¹²

Because traditional institutions have been unable to meet the growing demand for higher education, new institutions have sprouted around the globe, many of them private and for-profit. With few exceptions, these new providers have neither the commitment nor the ability to assume the research or service roles of HEIs. They rarely offer advanced degrees in the sciences or other fields that require costly facilities, and they are largely uninterested in engaging with social problems or developing relationships with the communities in which they operate.

Higher education's greatest challenge in the coming years is to contribute to building a sustainable future.

In a world of global markets, internationalization is likewise having a profound effect on higher education. The technological revolution has led to a dramatic increase in distance education, with rapid expansion of cross-border activity in higher education. New types of providers and partnerships for awarding degrees have emerged to address the increased demand. Information and communications technologies (ICTs), which by design transcend borders, are changing higher education programs, pedagogies, and quality. Although these new technologies facilitate access, they open a gap between two categories of education: cheaper open- and distance-education systems (mostly offered in developing countries) and the more expensive systems found in research universities in developed countries.

The marketization and internationalization of higher education have in turn fostered the current emphasis on ratings and rankings. Rankings have become an accepted tool for evaluating the prestige of universities and guiding the decision-making of prospective students.¹³ However, serious questions remain about the validity of the measurements, the definition of quality that underlies them, and their impact on society. Rather than rejecting them, HEIs now compete for high standing by realigning their priorities to focus on what gets measured and putting less emphasis on what does not, such as engagement with society.

Rethinking Mission

Higher education's greatest challenge in the coming years is to contribute to building a sustainable future. Over the past decade, several frameworks to guide this effort have emerged. Especially significant has been the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which has produced relevant declarations, guidelines, recommendations, reports, and resources.¹⁴ These and other frameworks have, however, yielded little in the way of systemic change.

There are three key ways in which HEIs can contribute to a new global sustainability paradigm. First, they can review how, and whether, their current practices contribute to the generation and dissemination of holistic knowledge in supporting a new worldview aligned with the complexities of the twenty-first century. Second, they can critically assess the competency profile of their graduates and reformulate course content and pedagogies as appropriate. Third, they can orient research priorities to support the SDGs and to align with the EU's Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) imperatives, which emphasize the social and environmental impacts of research and innovation.¹⁵

Participating in the transformation of the awareness and behavior of all societal actors is central to this new mission. Community-university engagement is critically important for identifying and solving pressing problems of common people in

We must find ways for specialization to coexist with education for global citizenship.

all societies and, at the same time, introducing new ways of conducting learning-teaching processes and research.¹⁶ Cross-fertilization with civil society can enhance the role HEIs play, taking their knowledge into the streets and putting it to work in campaigns for social change.

A Repurposed Curriculum

Putting this new mission into practice will require universities to reconsider how they are preparing their graduates for a world in transition. Redesigning curricula offers a great opportunity to facilitate reflective, critical, transformative learning that fosters responsible paradigms for living and being, both as individuals and as communities.¹⁷ Higher education can spread a critical approach to knowledge that questions the assumptions and beliefs on which contemporary economic and social systems are based. It can help graduates to become builders of inclusive, just, and fair social systems, cultivating in them a critical consciousness of the interconnected world they inhabit and preparing them to act in a framework and spirit of trust and collaboration. Such a mindset is essential to articulating processes for building societies attuned to the interdependence of the Planetary Phase of Civilization.¹⁸

Many universities respond to the challenge of sustainability by simply introducing new courses and degrees. However, creating new sustainability specializations is not sufficient. HEIs need to guarantee that all degrees and disciplines ensure a basic systemic competency for understanding and engaging with the most pressing problems in the twenty-first century.¹⁹ These institutions train the professionals who will attain positions of substantial—even extraordinary—influence in society. The content, values, and worldview embodied in their education can influence whether the decisions these professionals make support or undermine to the common good.

The expansion of knowledge has led to super-specialization. Specialization is, of course, necessary, but we must find ways for it to coexist in the curriculum with education for global citizenship, based on a generalist, integrated view of the world. Students need to learn how to see the broader context of their decisions and anticipate the impacts of their professional activity. This way, we can embed professional decision-making within a responsible way of thinking and acting in a global, interdependent society. The awareness of the impacts of activities will prompt more responsible choices, and a broader vision will open opportunities for transformative action in the world.

Today, education is focused on maximizing the content of the curriculum, some of which will soon become obsolete. To address the rapid evolution of knowledge, the prevailing educational paradigm needs to shift from a focus on *knowing* to

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one on *being*. This involves preparing students to discern the differences between information, knowledge, and wisdom, and teaching them how to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in a volatile world. It means helping students to search, synthesize, and apply knowledge from different sources and different cultural backgrounds to understand complex problems. It means showing students how to integrate feelings, values, and emotions with facts, a task for which the humanities are essential.

Just as curricula must change, so, too, must pedagogy. Formal education today is often didactic and hierarchical, overly reliant on rote learning. Transformational approaches, such as engaged teaching, which emphasizes experiential learning, includes service to community as a part of the learning process, and integrates community and civic organizations into the classroom, deserve greater weight. Dialogical, co-learning, participatory, and problem-oriented methods are also essential to a new pedagogy. Disciplinary studies that fail to make connections with real-world and real-time challenges are less likely to support useful learning for a sustainable future.

Transformative Knowledge for Social Change

We cannot solve today's pressing problems with the same kind of thinking that created them. In forging a new model, we must reconsider how we understand what is and is not knowledge and recognize that the production of knowledge is not the sole province of universities. To truly become cosmopolitan centers of global culture, HEIs must build bridges between different cultures and between different sources and kinds of knowledge.

Five deep changes should guide how we understand, build, and use knowledge.

(1) *From a monoculture to an ecology of knowledges.* The academic community and society as a whole need to challenge the idea that the knowledge residing in the hands of experts is the only valid kind. The supremacy of the rational-scientific paradigm is rarely called into question, but an expanded perspective provides space to consider additional ways to understand reality and to generate innovative solutions to persistent problems. Moving beyond the belief that the only criteria of truth and validity are found in science, we can see that recognizing the inherent incompleteness of knowledge is a necessary first step toward epistemological dialogue between different sources of knowledge.

Even when academia incorporates knowledge from diverse sources and methods—such as community-based research, indigenous knowledge, and intercultural dialogue—it often dilutes the contributors of non-conventional perspectives rather than engaging themselves in real dialogue that seeks productive exchange.

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Universities need a way of connecting different types of knowledge, acknowledging their existence and giving them equal value. It is time to decolonize knowledge and adopt a knowledge-democracy framework, taking into account the intellectual contributions from diverse sources and worldviews.

(2) *From description to intervention.* The purpose of knowledge is not just to describe reality, but to engage with its inherent capacity to transform society. Transformative HE would prioritize knowledge's capacity for complex problem-solving, contextualization, and social transformation, remaining attentive to variation and interacting across scales of social organization. This transformative emphasis underpins the emerging idea of social innovation, which challenges the view that technological innovation is the only valid approach to solving pressing human problems.

(3) *From fragmentation to holism.* Both holistic and topical approaches to organizing knowledge are essential to comprehending and addressing complex, systemic phenomena. However, HEIs are divided into disciplines, leaving knowledge highly fragmented. This is a major obstacle to collective understanding and action in an epoch characterized by the interdependence of the social, economic, and environmental spheres. Since any knowledge is partial, it is essential to integrate disciplines; otherwise, students and researchers will see the world through narrow disciplinary windows, missing the larger kaleidoscopic reality. Knowledge has to be built upon cross-disciplinary bases and embrace complexity.

(4) *From individualistic to social co-creation of knowledge.* Today, information and communication technologies enable us to access and share information and knowledge across borders and to interact and collaborate easily with others. This revolution brings into contact previously isolated ideas and areas of knowledge, resulting in new combinations that favor creativity and innovation. Recognizing the polycentric, horizontal, and cooperative creation of knowledge is essential to promoting equity in its production, distribution, and use, and democratizing the public sphere. New forms of community-university engagement, building on a vision for a new architecture of knowledge and an activist sense of social responsibility, are cultivating such knowledge democracy worldwide.²⁰

(5) *From stasis to dynamism.* In many situations, what is right today could be wrong tomorrow. Truth is contextual to time and place, but society seems to have forgotten this essential point when teaching how to live and act in a dynamic world. Education must go beyond linear, accumulative, and static knowledge management, adopting a more chaotic conception of knowledge that recognizes its quick, unpredictable evolution and ever-shortening life cycle.

Higher education can play a vital role in translating broad aspirations into knowledge, research, and pedagogy.

Toward a GT University

To be both locally relevant and globally responsible, the transition to sustainability will require new patterns of production and consumption, as well as attentiveness to *glocality*. In this context, HEIs face a tension: how to address demands to contribute to local economic competitiveness while playing a larger role in responding to global problems and contributing to a more equitable and sustainable society. In response to local demands, HEIs are supporting local and regional growth strategies which—in aggregate—can exacerbate global problems.²¹ HEIs with a clear vision of their local and global responsibilities can make this potential conflict explicit and work to resolve it.

The focus on economic growth has imposed particular priorities on teaching and research, emphasizing competitiveness over collaboration and instrumental over holistic knowledge. Knowledge shapes how we understand reality and how we act in it. We are losing the ability to engage critically with ideas, especially those that support the dominant developmental models. We have collectively assumed that what we do is normal, and, for many, that it is the only possible way. However, we are moving from a world of certainty to a world of uncertainty, for which we are neither prepared nor equipped to handle.

Society regards human, social, ethical, and philosophical knowledge as being of secondary importance to knowledge associated with monetary gain. This perspective allows for benefits for the few to come at the expense of the many and the natural world. Material wealth and technological innovation may advance, but not wisdom and real happiness. A society with a utilitarian, instrumentalist view of knowledge cannot be called a knowledge society. It can invent vastly profitable technologies, but it will fail to provide the conditions for all life on this planet to flourish.

There is an emergent consensus, embodied in international accords and declarations, on how to survive and prosper in this century. Higher education can play a vital role in translating broad aspirations into knowledge, research, and pedagogy that equip graduates to become agents of social transformation. This will help those who benefit from higher education to reach beyond personal returns and seek ways of contributing to the common good. Through their professional practice and decisions as global citizens, they can become agents of the transition to a livable world.

Endnotes

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