

How would you like higher education to be in 2050?

How could higher education contribute to better futures for all in 2050?

## **Higher education at the core of human society**

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Everywhere higher education has become, or is in the process of becoming, an institution central to human society, like the health sector or government. Before the pandemic four young people in ten entered at least a year of post-school education (in this note designated as 'higher education'), and more than 60 per cent in 57 national systems. The ratio will keep growing. Though from time to time, governments or economic interests attempt to frame higher education in narrow ideological terms, it is not an *intrinsic* instrument of political power or the creation and distribution of economic wealth, nor is it strictly bounded by national territory and identity. Like the health sector its intrinsic mission is to augment all people as much as possible. Higher education does this by helping students to form themselves as autonomous persons in social settings, able to use collective knowledge. It cannot by itself create universal opportunity but it provides all students with the inner resources of self-determining agency, their best asset in the face of structural inequalities. Higher education helps people to make their own lives, rather than their conditions of life being imposed on them by their environment, by absolute scarcity, and by other persons.

In principle this mission makes no distinction between people in terms of their value. Higher education is naturally common, open and flexible. The work of its faculty and administrators is normatively humanist and disinterested, unless something external to that work is imposed on it. Higher education frames culture as both universal and particular, while grounded in real communities in real places (like a family, it is less fully effective in borderless online mode). In terms of its core functions and reason for existence, higher education does not order people for the sake of control nor utilise them as economic producers or consumers. In higher education people and their agency are not seen as a problem to be managed or a means to someone else's end. People themselves are the end that is sought. Hence higher education readily works across barriers of politics, national identity, ethnicity, gender and religion, building the capabilities of all people (Sen, 2000) to cooperate in the face of the immense ecological and social challenges we face.

To meet these challenges we need durable post-national cooperation, incorporating insights from all cultural traditions in a multi-polar world; evolution beyond economies driven primarily by capital accumulation and growth, despite the resistance of those who benefit from the inherited political economy; the broader dissemination of literacy in culture, science and technology; and a transition from adversarial and suppressive political cultures to more effective governance that combines central coordination with bottom up collaboration. The necessary social communication, organisation, consensus building and international bridging depend crucially on the spread and improvement of higher education everywhere. There is no other sector, no other large social-cultural process, that will make the difference. Ordering by markets fosters greater inequality and consumes the eco-

system. Government (especially in its nation-bound form) cannot get us there without the uplift and spread of human capability and agency via higher education and knowledge. But for higher education to fulfil this role, it too will need to develop markedly by 2050, and it will need to move to a more elevated and central position within society all over the world.

### **The structuring of participation**

The last thirty years has shown conclusively that over time the expansion of participation in higher education is driven by growing social demand for education among students and families that want to better themselves, a universal human desire as Adam Smith stated, rather than by market-driven economic demand for skilled labour (Cantwell, Smolentseva and Marginson, 2018). Families and students want the advanced agency, opportunity, knowledge and respect associated with higher education; and as the frontier of participation expands the disadvantages of not enrolling become more obvious. Everywhere governments and private sectors expand the number of places to meet that growing social demand. The same pattern is apparent in high and low growth economies, and whether economies are focused primarily on manufacturing or services. The rate of participation in higher education is expanding towards universal levels all over the world, except in the countries with primarily rural economies - higher education is a largely urban phenomenon - and in those countries (often the same ones) too poor to provide basic infrastructure.

Experience also shows that over time, even in egalitarian societies, expansion towards universal levels is linked with growing stratification in the value of participation (Cantwell, et al., 2018). Elite institutions become both universally desired and more difficult to enter, and governments aspire to 'world-class' research universities, while mass higher education institutions are under-resourced, especially private colleges. A new caste system is looming, based on educational attainment, in which the social reproduction of affluent families is legitimated through education, other graduates are less valued, and those without higher education are excluded from the social mainstream, like modernised *dalit*. This is already an emerging social issue, arising from the more comprehensive role of higher education, one that is evident in political polarisation between graduates and non graduates.

How to modify this emerging neo-caste structure? First, ensure via funding and quality assurance that all higher education institutions are at high minimum standard. This means adopting a primarily public good rather than private good funding model, albeit with redistribution to the common pool via income contingent tuition or graduate taxation. The superior capacity of the public good model to sustain stable institutions has been decisively demonstrated in the pandemic, in which the market-based systems have really struggled. Second, diminish the capacity of top universities to accumulate enormous social power (as they will do, increasingly, unless checked, as the importance of higher education grows) by separating out scientific research and doctoral training. In other words, follow the model of the dedicated research institutes in Germany or France rather than the comprehensive 'multiversity' of the United States (US) and United Kingdom. Research scientists could guest teach in universities, but the main work of the latter, the principal source of their funding and reputation, would be education not research. There would be costs to the teaching-research nexus but it is crucial to weaken that other nexus, between research and the status and funding of elite universities, if high quality education is to become normal in other

institutions, and the public good character of funding is to be stabilised. The present US research university powerfully reproduces the rationale for the private good funding model, while restricting the scope for both high value education and high value knowledge.

### **Immersion in knowledge**

Successful higher education inculcates and strengthens in students an awareness of themselves as reflexive persons who can work on their own capabilities; installing in graduates continuous self-cultivation and the lifelong drive for self-improvement, in the context of social relations and values, experience and awareness of the natural world. These precepts have long been part of educational understanding, from the Confucian tradition through to *Bildung* in Germany and John Dewey and the American pragmatists (Sijander, Kivela and Sutinen, 2012). These ideas provide a wider platform for higher education than does human capital theory or the knowledge economy idea, where the value of education is limited by factors outside education. No doubt something like socially nested *Bildung* and self-cultivation will continue to guide higher education in 2050, as the continued potency of Confucian learning at home and school makes clear (Li, 2012).

However, higher education is also distinctive in that learned self-formation entails immersion in different knowledges. Knowledges are collective codes, akin to specialised languages, through which we relate to each other, imagine what is possible and work on our environments. The map of essential knowledge balances the universally known with the wisdom of specialist functions and occupations, and endogenous insights. It changes over time and place. Latin in Europe and the *Analects* in China are less crucial than they were, while amid unprecedented ecological challenge, when collective human agency must reorganise society rapidly in order to survive, climate science, and perhaps history and inter-cultural relations, have become more important. As participation increases, the point at which occupational specialisation takes place shifts to a later stage. We may need to move to a consensus on the minimum necessary learning in first degrees that will facilitate an integrated world: scientific and historical-cultural literacy, communications, languages, social relations, and preparation for work. Cross-border standards should be developed.

### **Higher education and work**

The relation between higher education and work is very important. For most students work is the next stop after graduation. However, the passage to work is substantially misunderstood and this stumbling block must be overcome. There is a lingering expectation, a hangover from elite higher education, that all graduates must enter professional 'graduate jobs'. Meanwhile the human capital narrative teaches that if the education is both good and sufficiently economically relevant, the labour market opportunities, higher productivity and national prosperity will automatically follow. Trying to realise these naïve assumptions immediately leads to a narrowing of higher education, and vain attempts to deny access, while denigrating the value of participation by social groups that were once excluded.

The reality is that as participation moves towards universal levels, the map of graduate outcomes increasingly resembles the shape of society as a whole. Prior inequalities such as those in family background influence opportunities at work. What higher education can do

is augment student agency, ensuring graduates are best placed to pursue the openings on offer whether wage-based work, entrepreneurship or collective production; and include preparation for the transition to self-earning economic life in every degree programme. This should be a primary component of general first degrees everywhere, and occupational training should routinely include a sustained internship or professional induction.

### **International and global**

Few of the factors that determine our lives, even technology, are changing more quickly than the geo-political landscape. Before the tipping points are reached in relation to climate there will be a further major economic shift to East and SE Asia; China-India will become the world's largest trading relationship; and the China-Africa nexus will have much advanced. Political and cultural changes will inevitably follow the shifts in economics. The US and Western Europe will remain great powers but in the multi-polar and post-colonial setting the Euroamerican centre-periphery model is finished. As Bruno Macaes (2018) notes, we are moving to an unprecedented world, in which close interconnectedness will be combined with distinctive major traditions irreducible to each other, including North America, various strands in Europe, South Asia, Latin America, the Chinese civilisational zone, the Arab countries and different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, not to mention Russia and Iran.

The present state structures and multilateral machinery cannot cope with this but higher education and science have key roles building cultural awareness and global competence, and in maintaining the 'thick' global communications necessary to building a new and stable world society. It will be crucial to keep open the flows of ideas, knowledge and people in higher education and foster academic freedoms in all countries. Above all, and notwithstanding the present attempts by American authorities to decouple academic cooperation between China and the US, it is crucial to foster mutual awareness between the different traditions of US/Europe and China. Both traditions embody tools vital to the solution of common global problems. Neither has all of the answers. Unless hybrid models of governance, economy and society are developed, it is unlikely world society can emerge.

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