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Quality assurance or neo-imperialism: Developing universities in the third world

Background

The past 20 years, higher education institutions have been recognized as a key driver for societal growth in so-called developing countries. Capacity building of universities is now widely included in donor policies. However, only few educationalists are involved in major development studies centres, which may be why education often gets a superficial treatment (McGrath, 2010). Projects focusing on quality reforms in teaching and learning processes are mushrooming, still little is known about how the development of the higher education sector takes place in different places. This paper reports from work in progress concerning capacity building in the higher education sector in developing countries. Our key question is 'how can we develop universities in 'the Third World' without imposing a neo-imperialist agenda?' We are interested in the topic both from a research perspective and as practitioners.

Universities and their scientific knowledges are often seen to have ubiquitous qualities; yet, the type of institutions promoted worldwide are ultimately an outcome of development in learned institutions in Western Europe and North America in the past 2-300 years (Livingstone, 2003). Some might claim that the promotion of universities as a key to societal development in Africa and elsewhere in developing countries is yet another neo-liberal agenda where education is the new commodity (Naidoo, 2007a). Often we fail to appreciate the multitude of knowledges and wisdom because they can be difficult to fit into our existing teaching and learning approaches and western epistemologies (Breidlid, 2013). With the increasing trade in higher education services (Bashir, 2007), we want to stress the importance of understanding the situatedness of knowledge. We emphasise the local aspect of knowledge and the provincial perception of learning and teaching.

Theoretical inspiration

In this, we are inspired by Rajani Naidoo and her focus on imperialism and higher education in the 21st Century and by David Livingstone and his research on the situatedness of scientific knowledge. Naidoo has written about higher education as a global commodity, highlighting

perils and promises for developing countries (2007a, 2007b). Livingstone's research concerns the geography of scientific knowledge. He shows how research takes place in places from the small place such as a laboratory to the regional setting in which it is produced (2003). It is the regional setting, we are interested in. Moreover, we are concerned with both the production of science and the teaching and learning of scientific knowledge. It is important to stress that despite this focus on the knowledge and wisdom diversity and local aspect of global knowledge, we do not want to reify the local and imply a static notion of knowledges. Hence, we are also inspired by the so-called 'mobile turn' in the social sciences (Adley, 2009; Sheller & Urry, 2006) and using this for understanding how knowledge 'travel' for instance through and with international students.

Case: Building Stronger Universities

Within the last two decades, Denmark has supported capacity building of universities in Africa. From the outset, the projects were donor-driven and had aims formulated by the donor; for example increasing the number of faculty-members with a PhD, and enrolling an increasing number of PhD-students. Within recent years, the approach has changed towards a recipient-driven process. However, this shift has not been smooth as it has proven difficult always to find interested researchers and universities in the donor country for the projects formulated by the recipient researchers and institutions. Based on our own experiences these projects are sometimes rejected due to different perception of research focus. However, also the question of quality is influential implicit favoring the Western hegemonic discourse regarding quality of higher education and research. We have been involved in different capacity-building projects, most recently in a number of 'train-the-trainer' PhD-courses in Ghana and Tanzania. Here PhD-supervisors participate in a course concerning their practice as supervisors. As it turned out, the majority of the participants held PhD-degree from either a European, American/Canadian or Japanese university. Hence, they had extensive multi-cultural academic experiences. Based on interviews with the participants, we came to notice how the cultural setting influenced their way of thinking about PhD-supervision. They were very positive towards our course despite the fact that we – out of ignorance – neglected some of their problems as supervisors. For example what do you do when your PhD-student leave for 3 month in order to attend to urgent family matters in the village, perhaps even without telling you? This was something quite a number of the participants had experienced. Their problems were so local that we had not anticipated them and did not have an answer when confronted with them during class. Our emphasis on quality of supervision became somewhat inappropriate in that context. We realized that we had participated in a mainstreaming of academia despite our intention to do the opposite. Regardless of the positive evaluation, we returned with a strange feeling of imposing a neo-imperialist discourse. Yet, the participating researchers were qua their multi-cultural academic background capable of appreciating the intensions. In hindsight, it is evident how knowledge has travelled with these international PhD-students who are now employed at African universities.

Implications for further research

With this work in progress we wish to address issues such as: How can we make sure the focus on internationalisation and quality assurance in higher education is not neo-imperialism in disguise? How can we make knowledge diversity an asset instead of mainstreaming knowledge?

While it is only a minority of researchers at universities in Europe who are directly involved in capacity building in developing countries, many faculty members enter multi-cultural classrooms and have to deal with the diversity of backgrounds and approaches to knowledge and academia. Many of us have met students with different, perhaps insufficient academic competencies and some universities offer academic preparation courses to international students. But are these a result of our western epistemologies and our perception of knowledge as universal? And are we failing to appreciate the diversity of knowledges? How can this be done? And to what extent should we do that? These are pertinent questions to ask higher education during globalisation.

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