Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Question of Agency Within the Normative Assumptions Inherent to the SDGs: Insights from South African and Indian Academics in Higher Education Leadership

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract:

Drawing on the experiences of twenty academics in key leadership positions in HEI's in South Africa and India, this paper details the contextual, institutional, and individual factors that impact the deployment of agency in promoting equality and sustainability goals within the participants institutions. Participants in the study highlighted the endogenous and exogenous factors which affect their agency to promote transformation for sustainability. These included the disjuncture between national policy discourse and contextual realities, pointing to the incompatibility of imported ideas (such as 'internationalization' and unfeasible equality goals) with the contextual, historic, socio-economic conditions. They also laid bare the institutionalized nature of inequality within HEI's, and the hierarchical, apathetic institutional cultures. Drawing on these findings, the paper reveals the direct costs of the assumptions inherent in inherited policies on the everyday lives of academics and asks critical questions about the im/possibilities of driving equality and sustainable transformation from within such conditions.

Paper:

This paper attempts to illuminate the necessary conditions for the promotion of agency for 'transformation for sustainability' imperatives within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa and India. Gender equality and leadership have been highlighted as important areas in the Sustainable Development Goals with HEI's positioned as important drivers of change to attain gender equality (SDG 5). This equality focus is supposedly furthered by the positioning of HEIs as important drivers of the Sustainable Development Goals, to attain gender equality (SDG 5). Given both India and South Africa's constitutional commitments to address their historic inequalities, gender equality has been highlighted as transformational imperatives in their Democratic Eras.

However, if HEI's in these countries are to contribute to transformation and sustainability efforts, leaders within their universities will need to be enabled and empowered to contribute to transformation imperatives and attainment of the sustainable development goals. Aleixo, Leal, and Azeiteiro (2018) have noted that success of sustainability effort lies with the willingness of leadership willing to put them into action (Pham *et al.*, 2019). Thus, leaders play a decisive role in introducing sustainability, or not, as a key topic for higher education institutions. While the concept of transformation is a recognized concern within the fledgling South African democracy, it is less prevalent a notion in the academic, policy, and public discourses in India, with sustainability taking its place. Nonetheless higher learning institutions in both contexts have a mandate to work towards

achieving the sustainable development goals.

Existing literature however notes that challenges exist in terms of promoting sustainable transformation within these contexts. In both contexts, scholars have noted that a lack of information and understanding on what sustainability entails has been raised as a challenge, which results in the misconception of what sustainability is both on the part of students and academics (Aleixo, Leal, and Azeiteiro, 2018; Davim 2020; Parvez and Agrawal, 2019). Oppressive organizational cultures and financial constraints have also been highlighted as a challenge to promoting sustainability within the SA context (Davim 2020; Mawonde and Togo 2019; Mzangwa 2019). One study conducted at Nelson Mandela University also noted that the technological and resource challenge experiences in many historically disadvantaged universities represent a challenge to sustainability efforts (Calitz, Bosire, and Cullen, 2016). Likewise, in identifying barriers to sustainability in Indian higher education, a lack of supporting measures in campuses was one biggest challenges recognized, for example, planning and administration, innovation, and some indicators of operational sustainability such as waste, water, and transportation were deficient (Parvez and Agrawal, 2019). The Technology and Action for Rural Advancement (2015) also identified funding as the big elephant in the room as the lack of funding results in low-quality researchers and affects cutting edge research which is a weakness for creativity and innovation (Priyadarshini and Abhilash, 2020). Furthermore, Sheikh (2017) notes the structure of Indian higher education is overly centralized, bureaucratic and lack accountability, transparency, professionalism, and this result in leadership role ambiguity.

What these studies reveal is that though sustainability is becoming popular in institutions of higher learning in SA and India, challenges abound in terms of its implementation. As a result of the different challenges in attaining sustainability, there is a slow movement towards achievement and few strategies for its implementation. Drawing on the experiences of twenty academics in key leadership positions in HEI's in South Africa and India, this paper details the contextual, institutional, and individual factors that impact the deployment of agency in promoting equality and sustainability goals within their institutions. Participants in the study highlighted the endogenous and exogenous factors which affect their agency to promote transformation for sustainability. These included the disjuncture between national policy discourse and contextual realities, pointing to the incompatibility of imported ideas (such as 'internationalization' and unfeasible equality goals) with the contextual, historic, socio-economic conditions. They also laid bare the institutionalized nature of inequality within HEI's, the physical location and history of the university, the general lack of focus on improving standards by the management, and hierarchical, apathetic institutional cultures. Drawing on these findings, the paper reveals the implications and cost of the assumptions inherent in inherited policies on the everyday lives of academics and asks critical questions about the im/possibilities of driving equality and sustainable transformation from within such conditions.

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