

What is wrong with global inequality in higher education? Public good, reciprocity and associational justice

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Introduction

Virtually all the discussion of collective good associated with the debate about the increase in university tuition fees in England has been framed by national concerns to ensure Britain's universities remain 'world class'. The term 'world class' denotes intrinsic achievement. But it also implies rank order and attendant inequalities. What forms does global inequality in higher education take and what's wrong with it?

Global inequality in higher education is enmeshed with wider dimensions of global inequality, particularly poverty and vast discrepancies in income. Common measures of poverty indicate nearly 2 billion people live in conditions of grave inequality. Responses to this range from the minimal humanitarian to the maximal egalitarian.. Maximal egalitarians argue for a substantial provision of public goods by national and international agencies in relation to education, health, and social development to establish the conditions for decent life. Higher education is an important component of this, but inequalities in income are compounded by inequalities in higher education systems.

These include inequalities of distribution. Although the numbers of students have increased world wide, it has proportionally grown least in low-income countries. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest participation rate in the world (6%). But for some of the countries with the lowest levels of human development this is even lower. Generally students come from families, which have historically had access to higher education. Thus, while there has been some expansion of opportunities for lower socio-economic groups to participate in higher education in richer countries, these chances are virtually non-existent in the poorest countries in the world, where arguably the expansions of higher education might make an enormous difference. There are also inequalities in resources. Nearly half of those teaching in higher education worldwide possess only a bachelor's degree. In many countries class sizes have increased and students receive little personal guidance. Academic salaries have deteriorated and many academics hold more than one job and have few opportunities to undertake research. In addition there are inequalities in status and esteem, exemplified by league tables in which universities in developing countries barely feature. The fourth kind of inequality, is that between higher education institutions that have some orientation to global inequalities and those that ignore them. This ignoring can take many forms ranging from an almost exclusive focus in curriculum and pedagogy on economic, social and political processes that heighten inequality and lack of dignity for the poorest, to casual treatment of their concerns.

There are some inequalities which appear neutral. For example in our society it does not make much difference what colour one's eyes are, but a great deal of research suggests it still does make a difference, what colour one's skin is. This, often in association with socio-economic conditions, affects whether or not one gets good school leaving results, which university one attends, and whether one will become a professor. Thus some inequalities are neutral and some, through no fault

of the individual or her family, carry harsh penalties. These penalties within a particular wealthy country like the UK are amplified enormously if one happens to be born in a poor country.

Some inequalities are historical and these matter in different ways because they mean there is no level playing field. This is tied in with histories of colonialism, the uneven development of capitalism since the 1970s and the pervasiveness of discriminations associated with gender, race and particular ethnicities over centuries.

Inequalities in one space, for example the level of esteem given pure mathematics in different well funded higher education communities, may not be the same as inequalities in other, for example the numbers of well taught primary health care workers who are able to work with the poorest. But the inequalities in the different spaces have different consequence.

In trying to draw out what I think is wrong with global inequalities in higher education, I am concerned with are those that limit capabilities, the ways in which unequal higher education institutions may contribute through omission or commission to limiting the chance of lives with dignity for the poorest and might foreclose on the building of what Darrel Moellendorf has called the principle of associational justice,

Three kinds of justifications for global inequalities between universities are generally offered. Firstly, the competition argument is made. By this analysis there is nothing morally problematic about opening up higher education to a range of providers, a range of fee structures, a range of delivery mechanisms, and encouraging every kind of exchange. Secondly, a diversity argument acknowledges students and higher education institutions, are different. Here the notion is as long as we respect different cultures of learning, teaching and research in higher education, inequality is not in itself problematic. A third justification is a version of national or community or family desert.

In rebutting these three arguments regarding why global inequality in higher education is not problematic I challenge a number of presuppositions on which they rest., notably that competition, difference and desert are neutral and show that competition, diversity in this banal form and deser cannot build Moellendorf's associational justice, or even the conditions that might allow this principle to be reviewed.

Arguments for competition have merit, because they emphasise freedom. Arguments for difference must be acknowledged, because they recognise diversity. Arguments for desert cannot be completely ignored, because they do give credit to hard work, enterprise, and risk. But making these arguments only in relation to these abstracts and failing to contextualise them undermines their salience.

Inequality in higher education capabilities for institutions and individuals tends to undermine investigation into global public goods. That such questions of global public good are ignored has something to do with the way global inequalities in higher education are taken for granted. Naming these inequalities and questioning their foundations is an important project.