

## **Beyond Imperial Standardisation: Higher Education and Global Wellbeing**

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Higher education has been positioned as central to solving some of the most pressing issues of our time. It has been positioned as a motor of innovation, as a lever for social mobility and shared prosperity and as essential to cultural enhancement and democracy. Given the current preoccupation of policy makers to deploy higher education for national competitive advantage, one of the challenges for an international community of higher education researchers is to move beyond the competition fetish (Naidoo, 2013 ) and methodological nationalism (Shahjahan and Kezer, 2013 ) in order to focus on the possibility of higher education contributing to global wellbeing.

The paper combines theoretical frameworks from political economy and sociology with empirical and conceptual research on higher education to assess contemporary conditions that both facilitate and hamper the contribution of higher education to global well-being. The intensification of global networks amongst higher education institutions, the dispersal of affordable technological communications and increased cross border mobility offer important possibilities for universities to collaborate across borders to solve some of the most pressing issues of our time. At the same time, the application of studies in global political economy reveal the myriad of ways in which higher education is itself implicated in 'the new imperialism' defined as the intersection of 'territorial and economic logics of power' (Harvey, 2003) and the penetration of specific production and accumulation regimes and lifestyles across national borders (Panitch and Gindin, 2012). In other words, while national borders are sometimes penetrated by military means, they are more routinely penetrated by economic, political and cultural forces. These strategies give access to markets, raw materials and strategic geopolitical positions. Drawing on international examples, the paper shows how higher education has become deeply implicated in these new forms of imperialism. In addition, the transformation of higher education into a global commodity, the dissemination of a neo-liberal market based model as appropriate for all national contexts, pressures from international organisations such as the World Bank and the rise of global rankings lead to greater standardisation in how success is defined in higher education across vastly different contexts both within and across countries (Marginson, 2009). This leads to what I have termed the 'imperial standardisation' of higher education. While the pressures for imperial standardisation are mediated differently in different national contexts dependent on, among other factors, the history and structure of national higher-education systems as well as differing systems of macro- and meso-governance, the paper illustrates how these nevertheless contributes to global hierarchies, rising inequality and social injustice.

At the same time, the neoliberal western imperial model is not all encompassing and important deviations from this model and the underlying value base are highlighted. The rise of China, for example, a one-party state with a giant economy and the capacity for high value-added innovation has the potential to change global power relations and create new webs of influence (Henderson, 2008). China provides aid with no explicit conditions to low-income countries. China has also referred to its own '100 years of humiliation' at the hands of colonising powers and has challenged governance measures which place developing countries at a disadvantage. As part of China's increased involvement in Africa, China and 49 African countries have agreed on a three-year action plan to establish partnerships to promote knowledge-based sustainable development. Twenty higher education institutions in Africa and China will engage in one-to-one inter-institutional cooperation, including funding for 100 joint research and development projects over the next three years (Sawahel, 2009). Low-income countries are therefore drawn into shifting multi-polar regimes

of power under China's influence. While some commentators assert that China is a new imperial power and others insist that China builds capacity, this paper offers a more nuanced analysis of China's international relationships particularly with the global south.

The paper draws on the 'well-being regimes' framework (Gough and McGregor, 2007) which combines the work of Esping Anderson with Amartya Sen to apply a conceptual frame to the empirical examples above to analyse the potential contribution of higher education to global well-being. The framework is significant because it captures the heterogeneous landscape within which higher education is imbedded. It analyses both macro structures as well as more subjective elements such as individual and community values. It pushes against a standardized one size fits all model and instead analyses a range of different state forms including fragile and franchise states. It includes organizations above the state such as multi-national corporations and international organizations and those below the state such as non-governmental organizations and religious and civil groups. It shows the importance of local warlords and mafia-like elements which both control as well as give small measures of protection to local communities. Most importantly, it argues for human beings and their quality of life to be the central focus of policy. This stands in opposition to policies which focus on the means to provide quality of life as an end in itself. Well-being refers to an individual's right to health, autonomy, security and other fundamental aspects to achieve quality of life. Economic development or indeed global competitiveness in higher education is not seen as an end in itself but in service of these other aims.

The framework is expanded to include the public good roles of higher education (Marginson, 2011) such as cultural enhancement, critical reasoning and knowledge advancement. Within this framework, the vexed question of the extent to which transnational higher education is guilty of cultural imperialism will be raised. Escobar (1995) in considering Latin America has illustrated how indigenous knowledge has been largely erased from the intellectual field while Connell (2007) has persuasively argued that social theory from peripheral societies is often marginalized and discredited by the metropole. At the same time, there are dangers in perceiving all academic knowledge as ideological devices for maintaining positions of dominance without considering epistemological claims to validity. It is also difficult in an increasingly inter-related world to demarcate indigenous from non-indigenous knowledge. The paper concludes by offering ways forward to bring power and knowledge back into a non-reductionist dialogue in order to contribute to global wellbeing.

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