Higher Education and Civic Engagement
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Comparative Perspectives

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Foreword: Globalizing Civic Engagement

Ahmed C. Bawa and Ronaldo Munck

The global recession of 2008–2009 and its aftermath has brought home that the era of “easy globalization” is well and truly over. Back in the early 2000s, there was still a widespread belief that the magic of the market would uplift all the participants in the global economy. The realities of North-South differentials, however, are acute and possibly deepening. It is important in our view to place the civic engagement (CE) mission of the university in that context.

There are a number of reasons why this is important. First, universities as knowledge-intensive social institutions drive a strong globalization agenda and as such CE should be considered in the light of this agenda. Second, and perhaps of more immediacy, is the fact that CE is already intensively internationalized—with a particular mode(s) of internationalization. It may be argued that this requires a more rigorously conceptualized framework—for it to be properly embedded in a theoretical framework that takes into account the challenges posed by (and experienced by) globalization. Third, and perhaps at the heart of the matter, is the effective interconnectedness of the societies, geographical spaces, economies, political systems, and so on around a set of powerful global challenges such as climate change, the scourge of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, the growing socioeconomic alienation of youth populations, and so on. These are all knowledge-intensive challenges and CE is a knowledge-intensive activity of universities and their students and faculty.

What we propose is a “view from the South” (South Africa and South America respectively for the two authors) as a corrective to the dominant Northern view, necessary in our view to achieve new perspectives on the “globalizing” of CE. We do so by advancing a number of theses by way of
opening a discussion with all those committed to the globalization of CE—a project that we think will deepen the relevance of CE as a fundamental activity of universities in the creation of new knowledge and in the development of more engaged, more critical citizens.

Large and powerful forces of change and transformation are being brought to bear on higher education globally, and they impact on the theory and practice of CE. It is an exciting time to think about these changes and how they impact on CE. We will also explore how the theory and practice of CE may impact on new forms of social organization of higher education that are emerging in different parts of the world. Without seeking to review all the changes that are occurring in the higher education sector globally, for the purposes of this argument we will look at some of the key issues that will allow us to build a scenario within which to explore the ways in which theorizing CE becomes centrally important. It is argued here that it is no longer enough to see CE as something that must/ought to be done, or for that matter as often happens, to see it as an add-on to the core functions of a higher education institution. The theorization will allow us to begin to think of CE as a necessary and fundamental component of the core functions of the university.

One of the key changes in recent years has been the enormous impact of technology in the processes of learning and teaching, research, and simply in terms of the “globalization of the individual.” Social networking has reconfigured the ways in which communities of people connect with each other—both locally and globally. The amazing leaps in technology helps to reshape the nature of learning and teaching and research. How does it impact on CE?

Wonderful studies in recent years have been performed by Arjun Appadurai (1996), in which he explores the development of cosmopolitan communities of community activists—cosmopolitanism from the bottom. What are the implications of these and a large number of other studies as we conceive of models of community engagement, civic engagement, or other forms of engagement—when the center of knowledge generation is located within the communities within which students are placed?

The first (and often dramatic) change with massification of higher education is the growth in the socioeconomic (and sometimes ethnic, racial, and gender) diversity of students who enter higher education. This broadening of diversity has significant implications for the way in which we think about CE in higher education. For instance, what are the implications for CE when some of the students at the university are drawn from the very communities that are traditional sites of CE? This shall be explained further below. The participation rate of 18–24-year-olds in South Korea is now fast approaching a 100 percent and similar rates exist in China, the Nordic states, and so on.
Elsewhere in the world there are strong attempts to bring participation rates up to these levels. Why is this happening?

The first reason is simply the fact that there are strong demographic forces being brought to bear on governments to broaden access to higher education. Study after study indicates that young people who have higher education qualifications fare better in the labor market. The second reason is the idea that the knowledge economy is redefining the labor market with special emphasis on the need for high-level skills. The mantra of the World Bank, UNESCO, and so on, directed at developing nations, is to grow higher participation rates—as a way of meeting the challenges of connecting with the globalized economy. What is the knowledge economy? One can think of it as the growth of the nexus between the preeminent role of knowledge/information workers in production, the networked society (with its vast and immediate capital flows), the growth of the service industry in terms of the globalization of the world of production, and the increasing flows of skilled people globally. The commonly held conceptual framework is that the growth of the knowledge economy requires a vastly expanded provision of higher education. The question then is what are implications of massification—or the shifts toward massification—on the nature of CE.

The second (and perhaps more fundamental) change to the functioning of the institutions of higher education is to do with the change in the knowledge project of universities as they attempt to adjust for the “new market” for knowledge and in particular research that is driven by the needs of industrial innovation. Several changes have occurred. The first is the greater complexification of the traditional notion of the research spectrum—the unique pathway from basic, fundamental research to applied research and then to product-related research. There is, for example, excellent evidence now of how this spectrum is often convoluted with product-related research leading to new, basic forms of knowledge. This makes for new forms of relationship between different kinds of knowledge worker.

The study by Gibbons and colleagues (1994) that attempted the construction of a new paradigmatic approach to the kinds of knowledge production processes underway in European universities found a number of interesting trends. Mode 2 knowledge production, as they called it, starts out with an applications imperative rather than an academic one. This immediately broadens the base of the participants who shape the research question because university-based academics may not be most suitably placed to understand “industry problems.” The applications imperative has research and development operations that exhibit an increasingly complex relationship between higher education, the state, and the private sector. This leads to an emphasis
in all higher education systems on growing instrumentalism; driving and shaping (and reshaping) of curricula, research agendas, and so on. At the more fundamental level, these changes begin to challenge the philosophical underpinnings of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and so on. At a more systematic level, there are enormous challenges to the processes of peer review and other forms of sectoral self-regulation.

The third reason is related to the two above and has to do with the vastly increased demand for research, development, and innovation. This is matched by the development of new national or provincial or sectoral systems of innovation. A fundamental implication arises: Problems in the real world rarely are kind enough to split themselves into disciplines and hence these projects aimed at solving these problems are invariably multi-/inter-/transdisciplinary. This then drives the construction of the research teams, whose numbers are drawn from different disciplines; they are from universities and/or from government laboratories and/or industrial laboratories and so on. Then the research teams are transient—they come together to deal with a specific research problem. And finally there are implications for the nature of the outputs that emerge from these research projects—research papers, research reports, design documents, patents, and so on. The emergence of this kind of knowledge production challenges the preeminence of the Newtonian models of research at universities. Mode 2 knowledge production has enormous implications for the way in which we consider CE—since so much of CE is about the building of forms of engagement concerning challenges in communities. We shall return to this.

It is now increasingly acknowledged that universities can play an important role in terms of local community development in support of civil society, especially in a knowledge-based global economy and a world characterized by social exclusions and inequalities. The productive interaction between the university and the wider community can be beneficial in a number of ways. It can lead to enhanced human and social capital development, improved professional infrastructure and capacity building, as well as, more broadly, to benefits for the socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural dimensions of the wider community. The contribution toward the development of active citizenship is an intangible but significant addition to the core business of a university. To generate informed debate on issues of significance to communities is also an area where universities can contribute to the improvement of quality of life. The university as a “corporate citizen” can respond to real needs in the local community, with which it should work for mutually productive outcomes. UNESCO explored, some years ago, the role of universities in developing knowledge societies, rather than simply thinking about their role in support of building knowledge economies.
The contemporary university should not conceive of CE as something of a “feel good” luxury or as a sideline. Rather, we need to understand citizenship as a vital third leg of what a university is about, alongside (and equal to) research and teaching or to understand CE as being fully integrated into the teaching and research agendas. Certainly the Irish government now seems to be suggesting that “innovation” should be the “third pillar” alongside teaching and research but, arguably, the access agenda is even more important to drive forward in a recession. More broadly, student learning outcomes will be significantly enhanced through innovative curricula that are relevant to community issues and priorities. Increased opportunities for students in terms of experimental learning through CE will benefit them and the university. New research opportunities and funding sources can also be opened up for faculty who engage creatively and openly with the wider community. There will also be an intangible but nonetheless real benefit for a university’s reputation if it is seen to act as a good citizen in relation to its wider community. CE should thus be seen as a core activity of the contemporary university.

CE as part of the research agenda of universities serves the powerful function of involving students and faculty in building the capacity of communities in the production of new knowledge (or even knowledges) embedded in communities. An example of this is a study being carried out by Dr. Paulos Mokoena at the Durban University of Technology, who studies through community engagement, involving undergraduate and graduate students, the fermentation techniques used by the Qadi Community in the Inanda area of Durban in South Africa to improve the nutritional status of the community. In this study, they focus on the history of fermentation that spans hundreds of years and that unearths new knowledge about the use of technology in rural and peri-urban communities. A Chinese research group working on the same topic in China has now formed a link with this group to carry out comparative studies.

The global history of the university has always been to produce new generations of intellectuals and professionals—what used to be the reproduction of elites. With growing massification, this is a more democratic project. At the heart of the project is the development of a productive citizenry. CE has been designed to play an important role in this regard. In doing so this defines the identity of the university. Another role of universities has been their work in, and promoting, sustainable cities and regions especially in the context of vast studies by Castells (Susser 2002) and others that point toward a special role for cities and city-regions as centers for development—and more so in the context of globalization.

For these kinds of emphases, alongside the important citizenship strategy to be effective and durable, it requires deliberate and mutually determined
collaboration between all sections of the university community (faculty, administration staff, and students) and the wider community. Over and beyond this “buy-in” with all sections of the university and the community, there is a need for this strategy to be embedded in practice as well as in principle. It is all very well for citizenship/community strategies to feature in strategic and mission statements, but these need to be embedded and mainstreamed in student and academic culture for them to deliver.

Universities could once assume a self-evident national remit and role in relation to the community they serve, but today higher education is now clearly part of a global system of knowledge generation and transmission, and increasingly, of a global labor market. Yet, in the discourse of most Western universities “internationalization” denotes simply the attraction of more high-fee-paying overseas students. Little attention is paid, even theoretically, to students as global citizens, yet clearly today citizenship needs to be conceived in broader than national terms if it is to be meaningful. The internationalization of the curriculum also lags far behind the internationalization of research. Globalization—or the new knowledge society, to put it in other terms, is having a massive, but as yet underspecified, impact on all the academic disciplines. Another aspect of globalization—namely migration—is also changing the nature of the university, and this is at best recognized by token policies on diversity. Most universities have simply not been too successful at “educating global citizens in a diverse world” (Banks 2003). Citizenship education has traditionally had a national, not to say nationalist and assimilationist, character and as James Banks puts it, “Citizenship education must be transformed in the 21st Century” (Banks 2003, 2). In Ireland there has been a campaign to develop “active citizenship” but has been a simplified version of the contested notions of Robert Putnam (2001) around “social capital.”

If the university is not an ivory tower, nor an extension of the business world, then it needs to be socially embedded. There are dense social networks some may wish to call “social capital,” tying the university in with its local community. These can include social, economic, cultural, political, and sporting links. Social embeddedness is a two-way street—a relationship that is sometimes fraught but always productive. The university is—or should be—firmly committed to social transformation and the pursuit of knowledge for the benefit of the community. A socially embedded university becomes anchored in a community, with its positive democratic and communal values. In its turn, the university can (and does in part) put its considerable intellectual resources to imaginative uses. Our universities are at a crossroads. We can no longer do business as in the past—therein lies the path to obsolescence—but the pathways to the future are not yet clear.
Universities are well placed—we would argue—to link the requirements of the economy with the demands of citizenship. The production of knowledge was once engaged in for its own sake; now we see the instrumentalization of knowledge by market requirements, which has undermined the traditional elitist role of the university. The contemporary university can regain a positive role by prioritizing social goals, by researching in socially relevant ways, and by placing social inclusion at the heart of its mission. The university is well placed to bridge the gap between science/technology and citizenship. Science needs to be relevant to people and to engage with the day-to-day life of the citizen. Technology—not least, information and communication technology—permeates the world around us, but it needs to be humanized. There is a central role for CE in this project through the necessary development of dynamic interfaces between the university and its social context.

We would argue that there is no “one right way” to do CE. That was the mistake of neoliberal fundamentalism in the 1990s, which preached that there was a universal economic doctrine that could work everywhere at all times. Back in the 1950s a similar universal model of development prevailed, namely Walt Rostow’s (1971) stages of economic growth model. That very particular North American perspective set the parameters for the further development process right up to the 1970s. What is most interesting is how community service in the United States also emerged at the same time through a commission on higher education set up by President Truman. Thus both initiatives—overseas development and community development at home—merged at the same time and under the same ideological sign. Both were marked by a confident US position in the postwar order as the former colonial powers faded in importance. Both had democracy at their core, but it must be said a model of democracy that was rather ethnocentric. From a Southern perspective the era opening up was one of the US-led neocolonialism and not the dawn of a new truly democratic era.

What we need to be aware of from a global perspective is the danger of taking one particular national model as the norm for CE. Whether it be the US “service” model or some other one, we need to accept that “one size fits all” is not a viable philosophy for CE. The same way, there are distinctive models of capitalism—never mind the noncapitalist alternatives—each with social and cultural contexts that will be highly variable. Even the market means different things when it is socially embedded (or not) in different ways.

CE in the United States is not the same as CE in Western Europe. The term “service” has very different meanings even in the English-speaking world, never mind in Latin America for example. In the global South the academic engagement with the community has often been on a more openly
political basis supporting social transformation, democratization, and social transformation. Sometimes perspectives that claim to be apolitical are in fact conservative approaches committed to the status quo.

In the current international networks promoting CE there is considerable emphasis on corporate donors. This is where the “view of the South” is particularly useful, because for many decades we have known the pluses and minuses of overseas aid. Donations are neither “good” nor “bad” but they do have an impact on how priorities are chosen and how programs are implemented. This is as much the case for CE programs as it is for national development plans. Nor does it necessarily mean that there is always heavy-handed political interference at play. But universities do need to think through critically and reflect on the significance of corporate involvement in their CE programs. The business philosophy of CSR (corporate social responsibility) is clearly different from the needs of a community, and for that matter, from the educational and social mission of the university. While in the field of overseas aid there is a long-standing debate around aid conditionality and the politics of donor–recipient relationships it is somewhat striking that no such debate is apparent in the CE domain.

A new global model for CE will only emerge out of a global dialogue. Globalization has not produced a “flat world,” as some analysts predicted. Rather it has accentuated regional, spatial, gender, ethnic, and age differentials and imbalances. How we all “do” CE will depend on the context within which our higher education institutions work. The engaged university is one we all aspire to but how we deliver on this will vary across countries. We probably need to be more open about the politics in CE and might usefully focus on the need for “bringing politics back in.” This seems to be a more productive—if a difficult—way to reinvigorate the debate around higher education and CE. Certainly an apolitical approach might in the short term suit some institutional actors but in the long run it only stores up tensions and contradictions. We have nothing to lose by “letting a thousand flowers boom.”

References


