

# **A broad approach of the higher education role: beyond training professionals to educating responsible citizens**

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## **1. Context**

Globalization is a term to describe an interconnected world, not a single world (Delanty, 2008). Thus, we cannot understand globalization adequately without taking into account its cultural dimensions. Even more, we cannot neglect the multi-faced nature of globalization, which is best seen as a relational dynamic rather than a new kind of reality.

At this point in history, more technological advances are being made and more resources are being allocated to education than ever before. However, there are also two major conflicts: one resulting from the relationship between humans, i.e. their coexistence, and the other associated with the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

Recovering the human capacity to evaluate, compare, choose, decide and act upon the world is more crucial now than ever before. According to Freire (2001), the idea of change presupposes that it is possible, but it is essential to understand the reality that is the starting point and the reality that we are working towards. This means a process of change and transition between the past, where we find our identity, the present, which defines our needs, and the future, towards which we direct our aspirations and efforts.

Diversity of civilizations and cultures is a basic feature of human society and a driving force of human progress. Civilizations and cultures reflect the great wealth and heritage of humankind; their nature is to overlap, interact and evolve in relationship to one another. There is no hierarchy among cultures, as each has contributed to the evolution of humanity. As Marga (2008) defines, diversity refers to lifestyles, technological acquisitions, concepts, value representations, behaviors and institutions, explanations, interpretations, value rankings and traditions.

Actually, one of the main concerns consists of promoting harmonious intercultural coexistence by means of specific solutions aimed at remedying the negative consequences of multiculturalism in the different societies, and at making diversity a source of enrichment rather than conflict (Bennani, 2008). Intercultural dialogue is essential in the actual context of the permanent transformation of the world. There is a need for common policies and strategies for promoting and disseminating shared values among the new intercultural community.

## **2. The contribution of higher education**

One of the key aims of higher education is to foster all-round personal development and educate citizens who are responsible, informed and committed to working for a better future. Achieving these objectives requires a profound transformation of higher education to create a system that is capable of anticipating the needs of society and individuals. Unfortunately, as Tajin (2007) mentions it is economic globalization, which has been more effective in dominating the policy agenda of higher education institutions in their effort to position themselves favourably and gain an edge in the global market. A new world, however, calls for a new kind of university, one that creatively redefines its missions and functions, that reinvents itself if necessary so it can continue to serve as a space for reflection and creativity, and that provides the tools needed for social analysis, critical thinking and sustainability

Social changes have shaped higher education institutions (HEIs), and this is reflected in their pursuit of social relevance and their capacity to respond to external demands. The need to be relevant underlies the multiple relationships between universities and their environment and is a decisive factor that reflects the alignment between the aims of HEIs and social expectations. The vision and mission for the higher education role needs to be clearly reoriented towards societal challenges, beyond the paradigm of the "ivory tower" or the "market-oriented university", to reinvent an innovative and socially committed response that anticipates and adds value to the process of social transformations. It is very important for HEIs to become, consciously and intentionally, analysts of the profound changes that are happening and of possible initiatives in shaping, anticipating, intervening in, and guiding these changes towards another possible world.

There is evidence that something is changing, for example the Alliance of Civilizations provides an excellent opportunity for higher education. The final report of the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations highlights that: education systems today face the challenge of preparing young people for an interdependent world that is unsettling to individual and collective identities. Education about one's own history fosters a sense of community and solidarity, but it must be balanced by knowledge of global issues and an understanding and appreciation of other societies and cultures.

Education is the key for change, it should inspire, provoke and motivate the free and active participation of individuals in their reality and equip them with tools that enable them to construct a new approach to problems in their physical and temporal environment. It supports a process of self-discovery and learning, fosters personal development, and helps people find their role in society, as well as strengthening communities and stimulating social progress.

If we understand that cosmopolitanism is a site of interaction and of cultural encounters as well as socio-cognitive development; then the university should be an agent of cosmopolitanism by playing a leading role in shaping the social and cultural horizons of the knowledge society. In that sense, the university is one of the few institutions in society that is specifically related to the development of collective learning processes. If knowledge is increasingly inseparable from citizenship and from democracy, then universities have a central role to play in linking both of the concepts of knowledge and citizenship.

Although there is no doubt that higher education plays a fundamental role for transforming society, the contribution of higher education and scientific research to multicultural coexistence is still absent from the agendas of the institutional authorities. It is also absent from higher education sites in different parts of the world, as it is considered a political issue, rather than a strategic matter for academic debate and research (Benani, 2008). Higher education has much to do in fostering intercultural dialogue in society by mobilizing the values of understanding and respect for difference, harmony and peace.

### **3. How we understand intercultural dialogue and understanding in higher education**

Cultural understanding means more than describing or knowing a culture: it means the ability to place ourselves, even if only hypothetically, in the role of somebody who has embraced that culture (Dallmayr and McCarthy, 1997). Thus, the first challenge is to change the strange monocultural way of evaluating peoples, cultures and knowledge (Muñoz, 2008). This approach is at odds with the plurality and diversity of the world.

Besides, intercultural communication is not limited to the transmission of information from one culture to another, or to simply living together in an informational universe (Ting-Toomey,

1999). It means, first and foremost, a motivating interaction in order to find solutions to common problems (Samovar and Poster, 2004). Therefore, dialogue should be considered not as an end in itself but as a strategy for guaranteeing the required multicultural coexistence (both inside and beyond national borders and on an international scale), such dialogue should be based on enrichment through difference and not only on tolerance of others.

Actually, people of different backgrounds hardly find places to mix, learn from each other, understand their divergences or discover their commonalities. As a social institution, the university could develop a vision of a diverse and tolerant environment, featuring a pluralistic and cosmopolitan community. Promoting respect for diversity includes age, ethnicity, gender, disability, nationality, religious beliefs, political ideologies, economic backgrounds, and national/geographic origins (Tajin, 2007). Higher education, therefore, plays a decisive and fundamental role in terms of the teaching content, values and skills it incorporates.

HEIs need to adapt their functions to this reality, taking into consideration the fact that new generations will be operating within this context. It is important that HEIs think differently about the social context of students, not only in terms of similar/different experiences of domestic/international students but also in terms of how societies are becoming more interconnected and interdependent (Stuart, 2008). HEIs should enable their students to gain a critical consciousness of the world they inhabit. This should help them to better anticipate, articulate and animate alternative processes that can lead to widespread human and social development as opposed to uneven, temporary surges in economic growth. There are different approaches that can be applied for achieving this objective, and one of them is the redesigning of curricula.

Curricula offer us a great possibility for supporting most of the challenges faced by HEIs and the emerging roles of HEIs, as key actors in a globalized world. The challenge is to integrate new areas of knowledge and practice within the current curricula as a transversal issue. At the curriculum level, GUNI suggested the need to promote education in shared values; education for national and global citizenship; and cosmopolitanism; or even more education for dialogue that enables students to act as global citizens, to recognize the rights of others, and to work towards improved conditions for others in their local contexts, as well as at the national and global levels.

If HEIs are going to support the development of curricula, it will be necessary to understand more fully the kinds of learning needs that our future “citizens” will need. In addition to an ongoing requirement for technical skills in a host of areas, a key learning need seems to be the capability by people to make connections between a wide array of knowledge in the face of increasingly diverse problems and challenges; and to do this in a way that places equal value on the nature and quality of our relationships with the world at large. In doing this, more emphasis should be placed on including in the curriculum the following aspects which are currently “marginal” areas of our education programs: emotional intelligence; knowledge and opportunity to adapt to and function in unfamiliar contexts; collaborative skills for work in groups, often with members from highly diverse backgrounds and perhaps even across former conflict lines (Taylor, 2008b).

The Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations (Istanbul, 2009) has already provided a number of clear indications of the priorities that will guide their work in the run-up to the Rio Forum of the Alliance in 2010, one of them is making education and youth top priority areas of action for the Alliance. The Report also highlights, that education will be one of the most effective tools in shaping shared narratives across potential divides. Education plays a critical role in promoting peaceful coexistence in today’s multicultural societies. To achieve this goal, we need to strategically rethink education in its broadest sense - education for human rights; education for citizenship and respect for others; education for intercultural understanding and dialogue; education in media literacy; education about religions and beliefs; and education about

world history. All these are indispensable strategies if we want to make the world a better and safer place to live together in mutual respect.

Although curriculum innovation rarely seems to address issues of intercultural dialogue and understanding explicitly, many HEIs offer educational programs on peace building and studies about conflict and war. In addition, there have been courageous attempts for developing curricula in conflict-affected societies, in order to address conflict and peace quite explicitly in a range of ways. But as Marga (2008) remarks, if we accept that universities train people in ‘competencies’ – which means the knowledge, general and technical skills required for superior performance – then the formation of global competencies and, at the same time, intercultural competencies should become part of university programmes.

Some authors have suggested the need to embrace the difference between ‘intrapersonal competencies’, ‘interpersonal competencies’ and ‘intercultural competencies’. Anyone who acquires ‘intercultural leadership competencies’ is able to perform specific tasks: to clarify his/her own notion of culture, which has to be well formed; to apply it; to understand his/her cultural background; to analyze and evaluate intercultural situations; to negotiate in these situations, to take decisions in a multicultural environment; to motivate participants in these situations; to form intercultural teams; and to exert intercultural leadership (Marga, 2008). Quite obviously besides communication, teamwork, critical thinking and innovation, universities have to train the student to examine, test and – why not – articulate visions.

#### **4. Beyond training professional to educating responsible citizens**

In this global era, being prepared as a citizen who will interact with society through the exercise of a profession implies a complex vision of reality. It also implies the need of abilities and values such as: a deep understanding of human being and life; sustainability as a collective social process to be learned; a need for common recognition, understanding and respect of different cultures for intercultural relationship and support of diversity; the ability to deal with an exponential expansion of technology, without losing the human capacity to put it to common human service; and the need to set aside fear in order to confidently cooperate on peace building in any levels of activity. Any profession has consequences and interacts with some of these items if not with all. In addition, we need to break the hegemony of the single mindset that seems to be advancing rapidly in globalized society. We therefore need to accept the complexity of reality and the interdependence of areas of knowledge in a real interdisciplinary approach of education.

In recent years, HEIs have come under a lot of pressure to meet social needs. This has been explicitly linked to training individuals with specialised knowledge, focused on a specific professional practice, to contribute to the growth of the economy, under parameters of increasing competitiveness. As well, it can be seen that research is increasingly oriented to satisfying the demand and necessities of those who can pay for it, principally in the production sector. Delanty (2008) emphasizes that one of the most important social and cultural challenges and universities is the need of a new idea of the university for the twenty-first century to give expression to an alternative kind of global culture to the corporate global culture, and also to represent an alternative to market rationality and not being exclusively agents of states. It involves a change of paradigm from a system that emphasises the individual and competitiveness to one that emphasises the social and collective (See Fig. 1).

<b>From individual and competitive</b>	<b>To social and cooperative</b>
Focused on content	Focused on content, abilities and values
Focused on training productive professionals	Focused on training citizens-professionals

Oriented to labour market needs	Oriented to the needs of society as a whole
Social use based on individual status and enrichment, and economic growth	Social use based on contributing to the collective good, social building and to human and social development

**Figure 1.** From individual and competitive to social and cooperative

Source: Escrigas C. (2008), Foreword. In: GUNI (2008) “Higher Education in the World 3. Higher Education: New Challenges and Emerging Roles for Human and Social Development”. Plagrave Macmillan. UK

Higher education is responsible for training the professionals who, in the course of their careers, will attain the positions of greatest responsibility. Thus, we can choose to merely train professionals or to educate citizens who will carry out a profession. Identifying individual and collective responsibility in professional decision-making, within new global ethical paradigms, will be a concern for the near future. Decisions in all areas of activity and in all of the professions can be made using an approach that focuses on the collective common good. We are not sufficiently aware of the collective implications of our behaviour and individual decisions.

HEIs have reached a critical moment in their long evolution as producers and disseminators of knowledge, and they are also facing global challenges. These include the rapid development of science and technology, demands related to the creation of knowledge societies, and the growing competition between increasingly multicultural and interdependent societies that are dominated by market forces. Such challenges require the world’s educational systems to adopt new roles and readjust their traditional missions.

The role of higher education in the world today is essential, as it has been in the past and will continue to be in future societies. Once this premise has been accepted and shared—which has already occurred globally in the last decade—then the relevant question becomes: *what education and for what purpose?* In this area, the debate is completely new and not at all obvious. In order to contribute to this debate, GUNI presented at the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education 10 proposals for higher education transformation towards a proactive and committed role in society.

**1. Open up to society. Proactive engagement in dialogue with citizens.**

Create a true knowledge-based society through engagement with society as a whole. Provide a plurality of expert advice in dealing with the problematic issues of the day.

**2. Incorporate sustainability transversally into teaching, research and institutional action.**

Shift paradigms from individual competitiveness, economic profitability and a short-term focus to the collective, with human and social benefits and sustainable in the long term.

**3. Become cosmopolitan centres of global culture. Build bridges between different cultures and sources of knowledge**

Knowledge is no longer produced exclusively by and consumed within universities. Instead, their task should be to connect different kinds of knowledge, forging links between knowledge and citizenship.

**4. Renew thought for society.**

Break the conformity of thought by proactively criticizing the world of ideas.

Transform the paradigms and beliefs established in social, economic and political systems, how we organize our community and how this is reflected in our education systems.

**5. Go beyond educating professionals to educating citizens in ethical awareness and civic commitment**

Know how to contribute to the common good through professional practice. Educate for *glocality*, democracy, citizenship, intercultural relations, peace building and a deep understanding of life's dynamics.

**6. Introduce complexity, uncertainty and transdisciplinarity** into the curriculum and in research, towards a holistic vision of reality.

Link different areas of knowledge in order to understand complex issues and find solutions to the great problems in the local and global context.

**7. Analyse the ethical, social and environmental implications of the advance of knowledge.**

Increase the resources invested in analysing the impact of science and technology and augment the capacity to absorb their expansion, in all aspects of human life.

**8. Democratize access to knowledge.**

Remove barriers in an effort to provide open access to expert knowledge, making it as useful as it can be. Move towards the idea of socially relevant knowledge as human heritage.

**9. Network for *glocality*. Cooperation and co-creation of knowledge**

Local needs require local proposals in global frameworks, and global challenges require global solutions that are locally acceptable. However, global solutions can come from local experience and vice versa.

**10. Link research to local needs and to the global development agenda**

Couple research, decision-making and development to inform decisions that affect large segments of the population. Explore how to link scientific research and political decision making related to collective well-being.

**5. Conclusions**

An open proactive reconsideration of the role of higher education in society is an obligation of public commitment and social responsibility. Consequently, a determination of the social role of higher education that is based on the weight of inertia, on a partial analysis of past needs or present complexity should be avoided.

If relevant means appropriate to the context, then, what is appropriate to the current context? How can we link the needs of different levels of the context in which all of the institutions and higher education systems are immersed simultaneously, or at least the local, national, regional and global levels? How can we work so that cooperation between institutions leads to higher

education systems that are relevant in their places? How can we link systems and institutions so that higher education is accessible and relevant worldwide?

GUNI proposed and analysed a reciprocal course of action. To go from an education at the service of the economic world—now facing a major crisis—to an education that drives sustainability—a challenge that is more urgent than ever. At the same time, to anticipate to human, social and economic needs, while giving greater priority to relevance, cooperation and the social value of knowledge than to competition and competitiveness.

These emerging proposals could provide a range of useful alternatives for designing institutional missions and local, national and regional systems with their corresponding associations and links at a global scale, in order to ensure fundamental human rights.

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