

Conceptualising, Strategising and Implementing Higher Education Change: 10 Propositions

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The Paper

- Identifies and engages with some of the **key challenges** related to change in higher education (HE) by advancing a number of **propositions**
- Institutional change in HE **shaped** by and **outcome** of a large variety of factors
- **Uncritical** imitation and borrowing and unmediated transfer ill-serve change

- **Premise:** in conceptualising, designing and implementing change, each country and university must

(a) Take as point of departure a **penetrating analysis** of specific historical structure, conditions, nature, challenges, opportunities and constraints.

(b) Ultimately must construct **own** agendas, social and educational purposes and trajectories of change and design **own** policies, strategies, mechanisms and processes for undertaking such change as appropriate to particular conditions, goals and priorities.

Proposition 1: Purposes and Goals

- Universities need to define their identity in the changing and “new diverse world of higher education”. “The most essential task” is to create “a sense of our own worth” by fashioning “our understanding of our identity” – our understanding of what it means to be a university. How are universities to create “a satisfactory sense of (their) worth”? **In what purposes are universities to root their “understanding of (their) identity” and what it means to be a university?**

- **Characteristics** of a university are four-fold:
 - Produces and disseminate knowledge which advances understanding of natural and social worlds, and enriches accumulated 'cultural inheritances' and heritage
 - Cultivates and forms the cognitive character of students
 - Committed "to the spirit of truth
 - Possesses the necessary academic freedom and institutional autonomy to effectively produce and disseminate knowledge.

- Still, need to caution against an **ahistorical, essentialist and universalistic conceptions**
- Many conceptions and models of the 'university' and have changed over time. "Name 'university' now applies to institutions with widely different functions and characters" - means that the "ideals each can aspire to" will be different
- Suggests that institutions should avoid aspiring to "ideals which they cannot attain". Otherwise, "no sense of worth will be forthcoming" and they can have no "proper self-confidence"

Proposition2: Economisation or wider social purposes

- Trend - to approach HE and investments in universities from perspective of the promotion of **economic growth** and preparation of students for the labour market
- Not disputed that HE must cultivate knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic development
- Yet economisation denudes HE of its considerably **wider social value** and functions

- **Higher education** has
- **Intrinsic significance** as an engagement between academics and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances and around our historical and contemporary understandings, views and beliefs regarding our natural and social worlds.
- **Immense social and political value** - Nussbaum (2006): education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the "cultivation of humanity".
- **Profound value for the promotion of health and well-being**, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and active democratic participation.

Proposition 3:

Institutional differentiation

- Universities accorded **diverse purposes and goals**.
 - Can all purposes and goals be achieved by universities or by a single higher education institution?
 - Or must they be distributed across the system and institutions?
 - What kind and spectrum of institutions does a national system require?
 - And what is to be done in countries that have a single university or high education institution?
 - Is there any virtue in homogeneity, where every institution seeks to be the same and all aspire to be a (research) university?
 - Should this be encouraged and accommodated or should such isomorphism be resisted?

- If goal is differentiated and diverse HE landscape, **how are choices regarding institutional missions and roles to be made:**
 - Left to individual institutions alone, or must the state actively steer?
 - Does the state, however, possess the capability to steer effectively?
 - And what policies and instruments - governance, finance, planning and quality assurance – are to be utilised and how, in what ways and to what extent?

Proposition 4: Access and Success

- Although may be commitment to *access* for historically and socially disadvantaged social classes and groups, often absence of attention to their *success*
- **Equity of opportunity and outcomes** depends on supportive institutional environments and cultures, curriculum innovation, appropriate learning and teaching strategies, induction and support, and academic mentoring

- **Equity of opportunity and outcomes**
- Are a condition of **democratising access to knowledge** - requires beyond physical access also ensuring “epistemological” access
- Are related to the **role of the university** “in a democracy” and social justice
- Are linked to **quality of learning, quality of universities and social cohesion** - diversity enriches the educational

Proposition 5: Learning and Teaching and Research

- Change, innovation and renewal in teaching and learning, research and community engagement often relegated to peripheral issues - susceptible to “**political symbolism**”
- Crucial questions
 - Intellectual orientations of programmes
 - Content of curricula, kinds of knowledge and epistemologies privileged
 - Nature of graduates to be produced and congruence with curriculum, methods and assessment

Proposition 6: Quality

- Absence of quality diminishes value of HE and compromises production of graduates that can contribute to development and public good – must be a **policy driver**
- Poor quality provision often justified in terms of 'massification' and access to disadvantaged social classes and groups – **tensions but no inevitable conflict between equity and quality**
- 'Quality' and 'standards' **not timeless and invariant**
- "Educational process, including curriculum frameworks, assumptions on which these are based, course design, and approaches to delivery and assessment" also **neither immutable nor a technical or neutral issue.**

Proposition 7: Paradoxes and trade-offs

- Change agenda may be suffused with **paradoxes**, in so far as seek to pursue *simultaneously* a number of values and goals that are in tension with one another.
- Raises difficult political and **social dilemmas**, choices and decisions, especially in the context of inadequate public finances.
- Paradoxes necessarily raise the question of **trade-offs** between values, goals and strategies.

- **Four options**
- Three '**simplifying manoeuvres**':
 - Refuse to accept existence of a dilemma.
 - Elevate one value or goal above others
 - Rank values and goals in advance so one takes precedence.
- Accept that for good political and social reasons, values, goals and strategies in tension have to be pursued simultaneously. **Address paradoxes creatively and devise policies and strategies that satisfy multiple imperatives, *balance* competing goals and enable pursuit of equally desirable goals.** Trade-offs inevitable - confront their implications for values and goals

Proposition 8: Pulleys and Levers

- Appropriate and clearly formulated goals and policies, as statements of intent, a **necessary condition** but not a **sufficient condition** for institutional change
- Successful institutional change also requires imaginative and innovative **pulleys and levers** – strategies, instruments and mechanisms
- Necessary to also emphasise the critical issue of **professional expertise** as creative and accomplished leadership, strong and effective management, administration and planning, and incisive policy scholarship and analysis are critical in the successful initiation, steering achievement of institutional change

Proposition 9: The determinants of change

- Important to avoid **linear** and **over-rationalistic** conceptions of change that presume that, once formulated and adopted, policies will result in the changes that are desired.
- Also wise not to assume that in all circumstances the **state** will be the sole or even principal determinant or driver of institutional change.

- Vital to recognise that policy formulation and adoption are merely two specific moments of policy making, and that the making of policy and policy outcomes are **not reducible** to them alone.
- **Change** is ultimately product of
 - **Social-structural and conjunctural conditions** (political, economic, social and ideological), inherited and changing conditions within higher education itself, and the **“purposeful orientations”** and **“cognitive and political praxis”** of a range of social agents and actors acting in **co-operation and/or conflict** “within a field of opportunities and constraints”

- More specifically: 6 key determinants
1. Change is a consequence of “complex interactions” or “the complex of political interactions – conflicts, contestations and compromises”
 2. “Institutions”, “institutional micropolitics” are hugely significant in the process of institutional change.

3. **State** - crucial, but just one of the wider complex of political institutions. Also “of particular importance...is the question of the **form or structure of the political terrain** in addition to the question of the form of the state”. Much evidence that politics beyond the state plays a role in shaping institutional change in HE.

4. The **market**, market forces or the economic domain more generally a key determinant of change in HE.

4. **Civil society** - in as much as domains of the political and the economic, and the interactions of HE with these, are key determinants of change, sphere of **civil society** not insignificant.

5. **Globalisation** and doctrine of **neo-liberalism** in different ways shape state policies and higher education - two significant and related, yet separate, impulses.

Proposition 10:

Contradictory Contribution

- Accorded numerous and often diverse social purposes and goals, HE is likely as a consequence of its core functions to play a highly **contradictory role** - simultaneously reproduce and conserve, reform and erode as well as transform social relations, institutions, policies and practices or aspects of these
- Precise scope, extent and nature of the **role** HE will play in social change will ultimately depend on conditions internal to HE conditions in the wider society and nature of the interface of HE and other domains

- Castells emphasises the contradictory role of universities as consequence of **4 functions** - ideological apparatuses; mechanisms to select dominant elites; generation of new knowledge and training the bureaucracy
- “The real issue is...to **create institutions solid enough and dynamic enough** to stand the tensions that will necessarily trigger the simultaneous performance of somewhat contradictory functions”

Conclusion

- Change in HE always a **complex undertaking**.
- Stock and of-the-shelf prescriptions for the undertaking of change are of doubtful value.
- Conceptualising, designing, managing, and implementing change in a way that is faithful to vision, values, and social and educational goals, but also informed by and sensitive to inherited and given conditions requires **imaginative and effective leadership**.

- Ultimately, trajectory, nature, pace and outcomes of change are products of the **combination and interaction** of given and changing conditions within and without higher education and the “purposeful orientations” and “cognitive and political praxis” of social and human agency.
- Two **dangers** in undertaking institutional change

- One is to consider stubborn and persistent given structures, practices and attitudes as essentially **immutable and impervious** to change and to either recoil from tackling them or seek accommodation with them.
- Here, there will be largely a **reproduction of the status quo** or only superficial changes that leave intact prevailing structures and practices and the privileges of those social classes and groups that sustain them and benefit from them.

- The other danger is a concern exclusively with **vision and goals** and a **voluntarism** that attempts to effect immediate, rapid and sweeping changes, irrespective of institutional conditions and with little attention to issues of effective planning, devising of appropriate strategies and instruments and the mobilisation of personpower and resources to sustain change.
- In this case, the consequences could include great flux, serious contestation and conflict, demoralisation of academic and support staff, erosion of existing academic strengths and quality and **grave debilitation** of the national system and institutions.

- Policy and change are concerned fundamentally with the “**politics of daily life** – with issues of power, control, legitimacy, privilege, equity, justice and the dimensions of values generally”.
- There will, therefore, always be **contestation and conflict** of differing degrees and varying kinds around a range of issues. This is unavoidable.

- It is perhaps in the **judicious and paradoxical mix** of:

Adherence to values and goals **combined** with flexibility of approach; purposeful, bold and resolute leadership and actions and **concomitant** deliberate, considered and sober management and planning, conservation and continuities **and** dissolution and discontinuities of structures, policies and practices as appropriate to the given and changing conditions and, **above all**, iterative and interactive planning involving key actors and the willingness to monitor, critically evaluate and rapidly learn from the processes and outcomes of change that the greatest prospect of **successful institutional change** in higher education and universities lies.

Thank you