

## 2.5. Curriculum, Higher Education, and the Public Good

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### Abstract

Curriculum change in higher education is an extremely complex process. Influences on the content of what is taught in higher education include new knowledge coming from the various academic disciplines, from the regulatory bodies of many professions, from national calls for action, from global challenges, and from social movements of the day. This chapter argues that in the search for excellence, engagement and social responsibility there is no contradiction between responding to local calls for action and global matters. Illustrations of curriculum change which attend to both the local and the global include classroom changes, single university changes and system-wide changes in Canada, Asia, Latin America and New Zealand. We call for more attention to community engaged learning and the creation of central offices for community university engagement.

Faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them. It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges, inter alia food security, climate change, water management, intercultural dialogue, renewable energy and public health.

*UNESCO Communiqué on Higher Education, 2009*

The inequalities of the global age are just as profound and in part more complex than the realities of the era of colonialism. Academic systems will need to cope with the key realities of the first part of the 21st century for higher education.

*Philip Altbach*

### Introduction

Higher education, particularly public higher education, like all other human institutions is a space of contestation. Almost without exception the leaders and contributors to educational life, to the business world, to politics, to science and the arts are products of our higher education institutions. The global middle classes see universities as the required preparatory step for their children to enter a world of work. Society recognizes universities as the main managers of the official knowledge production process. The market calls on universities to prepare flexible professionals for the global economic process.

However, deep societal and global challenges also reach out to higher education institutions for a response. Indigenous peoples and others call for decolonizing and/or indigenizing higher education. Climate change demands that higher education become more effective in the teaching and learning of what is needed for the survival of the planet. In a world of violence there are calls for universities to play a more intentional role in the reduction of violence against women, religious intolerance, nuclear proliferation and inequality. The public university struggles to respond to demands that it serve both the private and the public good.

**A tension that this report is exploring is the relationship between the seemingly oppositional pulls to respond to the increasing calls for universities to become more active players in their communities and regions, while at the same time responding to being pulled in global directions by the phenomena of global competition as most commonly experienced by the higher education ranking systems.**

**The argument in this chapter is that the global and the local are not oppositional aspirations.** It is

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false to suggest that if a university robustly contributes to addressing needs locally that it will stagnate or fall in the global ranking game. Similarly, if a highly-ranked university begins to engage locally in some powerful new ways that does not mean that it will fall in rankings. **The phrase, ‘locally relevant and internationally significant’ captures a spirit where excellence and engagement are synergistic partners with international quality and**

**visibility.** The examples of curriculum innovation that are shared in this chapter illustrate ways in which higher education institutions are shaping curricula to meet both the obligations of local engagement and responsibility while at the same time keeping an eye on the global. There is an expression, ‘all politics is local’. The same is true with the grand challenges as expressed in the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, ‘all global challenges are local’.

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## Curriculum: a conundrum

For those with experience in curriculum development or curriculum inquiry linked to formal schooling in the first and second levels, the curriculum is a quite different fish. Ministries or Departments of Education in most parts of the world control public schooling. The state at a national or a regional level controls the broad or narrow elements of the curriculum as part of its accepted mandate. While different schools or teachers do take up the curriculum differently, the overall framework or syllabus for both elementary and secondary schooling exists. This is largely not the case in higher education jurisdictions around the world. The professions of engineering, education, medicine, social work, law, psychology and nursing, for example, most often have regulatory bodies made up of members of the respective professions. In these cases, through accreditation protocols, the professions themselves broadly influence curricula. The content of the curricula in these cases is not normally controlled by the state.

**In those areas of higher education where one finds a majority of the students in the sciences, humanities, social sciences, fine arts and so forth, there are no regulatory bodies associated with the content. The curricula are organized through disciplines.** Anthropology in one university is likely to look like anthropology in another university. History may well take diverse foci from one department to another, but it is the historians and the anthropologists in a complex way who affirm the appropriateness of a particular set of courses. At the heart of university curricula are the individual course instructors and professors.

And **while inter-disciplinary or problem-focused academic programmes have increased in number over the years, the disciplines remain firmly in control of the canon in the vast majority of universities.** And as Philip Altbach points out, the central higher education canon is increasingly dominated by English language and Western knowledge based content (2004: 3-25).

But when we take even a brief look around the world, we can see that in spite of the fragmented process of curriculum change in higher education, change is happening. **While it is true that universities around the world are for the most part teaching from the dominant Western canon – what some would call a colonial knowledge framework –, there are changes within the disciplines and there are even new ones arising. These new disciplines have sprung up as part of a complex inter-active global discourse among academics, public intellectuals, social movement activists, political voices and others.**

## Influences on curriculum change

What are some of the factors that influence changes in higher education curricula? Leadership in our universities does make a difference. The strategic plans, the academic mission and broad statements of purpose of our universities make a difference. This is particularly true if the central planning process has some funds for innovation along the lines of the strategic mission of the institution. Over the past few years we have seen many universities take up the issue of global citizenship, for example, with an aspiration to support students to become more effective as truly global citizens. Other universities have focused on the principles and processes of engagement, with an expectation that engaged learners will learn well and be better prepared to play an active role in society. The notion of the civic university has found traction over the past years. The big challenges of our times also have an impact. Climate change when taken up by university leaders has had an impact in some universities, encouraging academics who have similar interests and concerns. The Rio+20 conference on the environment has had a strong influence on higher education for sustainable development initiatives (Tillbury, 2010: 101-107). National interests can have an impact. In 2015, Canada released a Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on the historic genocidal practices of the colonial settler Canadian government on the indigenous peoples of that nation. Universities have seen strong growth in a diverse number of courses and programmes in indigenous studies. The recent increased attention to the global refugee crisis has led to the creation of new courses and other curricular innovations in many parts of the world.

## Community engaged learning as curriculum innovation

Central university support of engaged learning, community-based experiential learning, and similar concepts has certainly encouraged curricular innovation (McRae, 2015:137-144). A belief that all students should have an experience in community and/or workplace learning, regardless of the programme of study must, in those institutions that are known for this approach, have had a deep

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impact. **Engaged learning, responding to the grand challenges of our times, taking action on deep issues such as reconciliation between indigenous peoples and others, and positive efforts towards decolonizing curricula have an impact because they are not discipline specific.** The specific way that individual academics, departments and faculties respond to these higher-level challenges is left where it belongs in the departments and faculties, but in-

novation does take place. The Stanford University definition that is shared by a number of Canadian universities understands community engaged learning (CEL) as a course, internship, or programme that includes an engagement with a community that addresses societal needs. It is an intentional integration of learning objectives and experience with/ in the community. Other variations of the concept include service-learning (particularly in the USA), and cooperative learning (workplace placements in all kinds of disciplines). McRae writes of the skills that students learn in the context of CEL, which can contribute to their ability to be change agents (2013:118). While her research draws primarily on engagement in workplace settings that include both market-based and community-based jobs, her work on competencies acquired through CEL can be applied across work-based settings.

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## The influence of community-based research

Community-based research (CBR), participatory research and engaged scholarship have emerged over the past 20 years as part of the increased attention to community university engagement in general. The UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education in particular has carried out a number of global studies on the development of these approaches ([www.unescochair-cbrsr.org](http://www.unescochair-cbrsr.org)). **CBR emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge between academics**

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**and those outside of the academy, research partnerships where community members as well as academics are mutually acknowledged as knowledge makers.** These forms of engaged scholarship are also having an impact on the curriculum in a variety of dis-

ciplines as the lines between instructors, learners and community leaders are blurred in a variety of approaches to community engaged learning.

## Stories of curriculum change

### University-wide innovation: Interdisciplinary Laboratories at the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento (UNGS), Argentina

The UNGS is a small public university intentionally created to meet local and regional education needs that were not covered by traditional academic offers. Its main campus is located in the Province of Buenos Aires, more specifically in Malvinas Argentinas, a locality marked by high levels of poverty and other related factors that have an adverse impact on living conditions. Since its inception in 1992, the UNGS has been conceived of as a space to articulate the convergence of research, teaching and community services to contribute to the socioeconomic development of local communities. The relationship with the local context is a key component of the identity of the UNGS, which has determined its origin, strategic project, institutional design and ongoing development. Most UNGS students are first-generation college students.

The UNGS has, since its creation, followed a university model that is mainly articulated around problems and themes, instead of traditional disciplinary bodies. Briefly, this involves adding to the traditional functions of producing and disseminating knowledge the explicit intention of conducting multidisciplinary research linked to the needs, problems and challenges that emerge from interaction with social actors in the immediate context. Interdisciplinarity is core to the UNGS, in such a way that the research, teaching and services functions are grouped into four multidisciplinary institutes: Institute of Science (ICI), Institute of Conurbano (ICO), Institute of Human Development (IDH), and Institute of Industry (IDEI). The institutes are academic management units that define the democratic and horizontal governance structure of the university.

Curriculum change happens through the integration of service-learning, community-based research and community action. The UNGS has a Community Service Centre intentionally designed to connect students, faculty members and a variety of stakeholders (governments, private firms and civil society organizations [CSOs]) through the management, promotion and dissemination of local and regional development projects. This unit integrates the service-learning (S-L) and outreach initiatives presented by UNGS professors that have an impact on teaching, technical assistance and research. Thus, the three principles that structure the institutional identity of the UNGS (i.e., research, teaching and community services) are embodied in the development of training courses and diplomas for non-academic stakeholders, external consulting services, basic and applied research, and local development projects that contribute to strengthening science and technology. These services are offered to achieve two critical goals: (i) to provide solutions to problems identified by civil society actors; (ii) to strengthen the entire process of knowledge production and the existing training and teaching practices within the UNGS.

In order to institutionalize the interaction mechanisms between the UNGS and the community, the Community Service Centre – advised by local CSOs – created the Social Council of the UNGS in 2012. This is a collegial body that presents projects that attend to the social, economic, cultural and educational needs of the community, recommends actions and procedures to consolidate community university engagements, promotes contracts and agreements between the UNGS and CSOs, and advises the university's authorities on matters related to institutional articulation and cooperation with the community.

Regarding the engagement of faculty members in S-L activities and projects, the provision of community services by the academic staff is a main component of its participation in the institutional life of the university. Going beyond what is mandated by law – and in line with the institutional identity of the UNGS –, the processes for selecting and promoting academic staff incorporate specific criteria and scores to assess (and award with extra points) candidates who have provided community services and incorporated civil society actors into the co-creation of knowledge in their previous academic experience.

Regarding the curricular links of the S-L practices promoted by the institutes, the UNGS has systematized a pedagogical experience called 'Interdisciplinary Laboratories' aimed at overcoming the traditional, paternalistic approach to university extension. The UNGS has three laboratories (Environmental, Entrepreneurial skills, and Social networks and living conditions) that are part of the curricular structure of all the degrees. This pedagogical approach articulates the acquisition of specific theoretical knowledge with practical interventions to solve a problem presented to the UNGS by civil society (Abramovich et al., 2012). As stated by a UNGS professor: "The contribution made by the university has to be embedded in a strategy that belongs to other people. You may agree with them due to political-ideological reasons, but it has to be externally defined, it does not belong to you...The impact [of this pedagogic practice] on the UNGS is huge; the impact on the CSOs depends on the institutional relevance of the problem or need that has to be addressed".

Since the implementation of the laboratories about 10 years ago as mandatory courses, the UNGS has collaborated with over 35 social organizations and networks in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. In 2008 and 2010 the Laboratory of Social networks and living conditions was selected by the Presidential Prize 'Solidary Educational Practices in Higher Education' as one of the top 20 S-L experiences in Argentina. This recognition has helped the systematization and consolidation of the laboratories within the UNGS and the external dissemination of the learning experiences through the participation of teachers, community partners and students in congresses, seminars and international meetings on university extension and S-L.

### Course-based innovation: refugees, democracy and action at the University of Victoria, Canada

This example illustrates a course-based community engaged learning curriculum innovation brought about in response to a global issue of some magnitude. In September 2015, a photograph of a policeman in Greece holding a young Syrian child in his arms, a child who had died in the attempt to travel from Turkey to Greece to seek asylum in Europe, ignited a wave of interest from people from around

the world about the plight of the Syrian and other refugees. The School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria decided to organize an experiential course for year-two students to provide them with an opportunity to learn more about the refugee situation as it pertained to Canada and the community of Victoria, as well as to the world. The course was also designed to provide students with an opportunity to learn skills in community development that could be used in other settings and was based on the premise that the global refugee crisis had local implications.

The course was based on a model of experiential learning using a pedagogical approach called 'pedagogy of hope'. In addition to experiential learning, the pedagogical framework drew on transformative learning theory and indigenous ways of knowing. The course was also co-designed, in a form of community-based curriculum design, with the leading immigrant settlement agency in Victoria, the Intercultural Association (ICA). Students were responsible for their own learning through a contract learning arrangement where students contracted for the grade that they wished to receive. They could improve their grades by taking on additional tasks. All students were expected to participate in the collective planning of a World We Want fundraising event that marked the end of the course. In addition, they had a choice to participate in a community-based research course with ICA members, in creating a video documenting the course, or in video storytelling with immigrant students at a local secondary school.

Dr. Nick Claxton, a Tsawout indigenous scholar, grounded the course in an introduction to the land given from a local sacred mountaintop, P'Kols. Students were told the story of the land and the people who have lived there for more than 10,000 years. Two critical points arose from this experience: the importance of place to all peoples of the world, making the need to leave their home such a great loss, and the historical fact that with the exception of the indigenous peoples of Canada, the entire population of Canada are, or are descended from, refugees, immigrants and other forms of settlers. As the course continued, speakers included recent refugees to Victoria, scholars of immigration studies, leaders of the settlement agency, artists and community development workers.

The arts in the form of theatre, drawing, mural making, poetry and song were introduced to the students as tools for representing complex social and political issues related to the issues of immigration. The arts were taught as well in preparation for the World We Want closing festival and fundraising event at the end of the course. The final project was a public event at the city hall in Victoria. The students had created 'stations' representing the journey of refugees escaping from their country, to life in the refugee camps, to travelling to their new homes, and to learning in their new homes.

### System-wide innovation: TeWhareWānanga O Awanuiārangi-New Zealand/Aotearoa

The second example is an illustration of an institution-wide and system-wide curriculum innovation in response to the desire to create decolonized higher education institutions in New Zealand/Aotearoa. TeWhareWānanga o Awanuiārangi was established in 1991 by Terūnanga o Ngāti Awa, and opened in 1992 before officially becoming a Wānanga in 1997. Awanuiārangi is one of only three institutions designated as Wānanga under the Education Act 1989. A Wānanga is a tertiary educational institutional designed to provide learning opportunities, in particular to Māori students, and to focus on the

development of Māori studies in general. The establishment of Awanuiārangi was an important step that recognized the role of education in providing positive pathways for Māori development. This means that Māori knowledge and practices are key components of the academic programmes, teaching delivery and student experiences.

Kaupapa Māori is the conceptualization of Māori knowledge that has been developed through oral tradition. It is the process by which the Māori mind receives, internalizes, differentiates and formulates ideas and knowledge exclusively through te reo Māori (the Maori language). Graham Smith Hingangaroa, a distinguished Māori scholar and academic leader, has been the vice-chancellor of Awanuiārangi. He is credited with playing a key role in the modern day conceptualization of the concept of Kuapapa Māori (1997).

What is of particular interest in the case of the establishment of a Māori university with an entire set of courses, certificates and diplomas built around Kuapapa Māori is that this one of the few examples of a university somewhere in the world that has been built on a knowledge system that differs from the dominant university content worldwide based on Euro-centric Western knowledge. There are 350 million indigenous peoples in the world. There are thousands of knowledge systems or epistemologies. This example shows that under certain circumstances, even what seems to be a quite radical curriculum change can take place.

### The university as a garden: educating for sustainability – University of Science, Malaysia

The environmental movement with its first global meeting in 1992, followed by Rio+20 and linked to the contemporary climate change concerns is another global challenge that has had the power to influence higher education curricula. When higher education leaders are able to articulate the links between the calls for more sustainability in ways that can involve at least some of their academic colleagues, change is a result. A case in point is the role played by Dr. Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, the former vice-chancellor of the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the current president of the International Association of Universities. The story of how the USM has undergone a series of substantial curricular changes through learning by doing is worth telling (Razak, 2009: 1-6).

Convinced that universities everywhere must change to embrace a globalizing world, USM has embarked on a long-term strategy to make sustainability a major mainstream guiding principle. USM believes that its large pools of disciplinary experts, high quality research facilities, excellent infrastructure and a cohort of students with varied academic interests will help to promote sustainability in the communities it serves. The USM has also tacitly accepted a responsibility to be the ‘social conscience of society’, in addition to playing the traditional role of disseminating knowledge.

Drawing on the metaphor of a ‘university in a garden’, the USM leadership encouraged members of the university community to imagine being in a garden and learning from the environment. Becoming aware of ancient, ecological and spiritual knowledge can be learned from a new relationship with the rest of nature. The means moving beyond the Western concept of nature as other or as non-human towards a perception of all knowledge, all life forms and all ways of knowing as part of the river of life,

including spiritual life. A point made by the USM leadership is that attention to the local, the community, the ecological, the indigenous and the Malaysian is also a way to achieve high level global recognition. The Western model of higher education is not the only yardstick for measuring excellence.

### Civil society and universities acting together: campaigning against violence against women Bhagat Phool Singh University and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), Haryana, India

Bhagat Phool Singh University (BPSU) is the first women's university in northern India. There are over 6,000 students studying a full range of undergraduate and graduate programmes. In a climate of public visibility towards violence against women and girls in India, BPSU began working with PRIA in a campaign approach to tackle the issues of violence in the communities near the university and including the university itself. The campaign was conceptualized, designed, strategized and driven by youth; both boys and girls from urban and rural spaces. The goals were to develop an understanding of gender inequality and discrimination at the root of violence against women and girls. Partners were universities, adolescent youth groups and community-based organizations (CBOs). It was an example of community university engagement with equal participation of boys and girls.

*Findings:* A study of the collaboration showed that the university was not as safe as the management thought it was. Spaces such as the academic block, library, hostels, cafeteria and staff quarters were all found to be extremely unsafe; leaving only the main gate and the road leading to it as safe. One of the findings of the study was that there was no anti-sexual-harassment committee in the university. Recommendations for actions were put forward and taken up by the university authorities. Students shared the study with the management and a committee was formed and PRIA was invited to be a third party facilitator. One of the cases that the committee dealt with later was a case of sexual harassment of students by their male teacher.

**Campaign activities:** The university hosted an event on its premises at the end of the campaign. More than 600 young people (both boys and girls) from 22 villages attended the event. The event was a youth sports event in which both boys and girls participated.

### Proposals for action

A review of innovations in local-global curriculum changes in various parts of the world suggest that the following actions would be helpful in accelerating institutional change:

1. **Support the expansion of community engaged learning** so that all students have an opportunity for well-supported reflective action learning in community and social movement contexts.
2. **Create community university engagement offices** or similar organizational structures that bring the engagement mission greater impact and better integration of research and teaching.

3. **Increase interdisciplinary opportunities for teaching and learning** linked to critical global issues such as those expressed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
4. **Support the development of community-based curriculum development** jointly between academics and community organizations.
5. **Create problem- or issue-focused teaching and learning centres** or institutes that cut across disciplinary boundaries.

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