Higher Education, a Time for New Decisions: Inclusion and Integration in Cross-Sector Work

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Abstract

The accumulation of events and decisions that have shaped the current reality of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) opens an opportunity for these institutions to reimagine the ways in which they can deliver their value to society. Collaboration and partnerships as cross-sector work have been considered essential to address the complexities of our most pressing societal problems. Leadership at different levels of these institutions are exploring and supporting the co-design of alternative solutions and social change through civic engagement. However, the participation of members of marginalized communities at the co-creation level is still scarce. This paper draws from examples of social innovation and systems change in the HEI context in different countries. It suggests that the inclusion and integration of the perspectives of practitioners and community members with the closest proximity to society's most pressing challenges presents a mutual opportunity. Thereby potentially promoting more effective innovation and social impact.

Context

Whilst no one can deny the transformational capacity of higher education, the current conversation around the crisis of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) revolves around the declining trust in their ability to improve the future of society and the alternatives that can be created around this (Gast 2018). A myriad of events and phenomena have contributed to this perception. Statistics on the impact of demography (Carey 2022), the decline of enrollment (McKinsey 2021), the well-known issue of stress on employability (Matherly and Tilman 2015), and an increased disconnect between education and what employers need (Hansen 2021), are examples of this. Furthermore, the impact of the financial crisis in 2008 (Geiger 2010) and the level of disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current economic slowdown (IMF 2022) have had, increased the already high pressures on HEIs and on society. Whilst the notion and conversation around HEIs in crisis are not new (Ashwin 2020), our time of exponential change represents a turning point (Scott and Portes 2022) and an opportunity for leadership at different levels of these institutions to steer in new directions.

For years the idea behind higher education was to equip those that would be tomorrow's leaders in order to solve tomorrow's problems. However, given the speed of change that we are currently living, the way we think about the future also needs to change. And as part of this, we

need to recognize that in order to solve the problems of tomorrow, we need to address the problems of today differently. Leadership needs to address the systemic problems that perpetuate our most pressing social challenges, and for this, the importance of inclusion, integration, and collaboration are key.

HEIs are key players in the advancement of alternative and innovative solutions for society's most pressing challenges. Yet, many have argued that the lack of proximity[i] to these social challenges and to the communities that experience them firsthand can diminish their ability to be effective agents of social innovation (Skoll Centre for Entrepreneurship 2018). This effectiveness can also be diminished by HEI's own institutional constraints and reward systems (George et al. 2019). Collaborative strategies that intentionally aim to bridge this distance are necessary and could offer new pathways for the delivery of higher education's proposition to society.

The integration and inclusion of the perspectives, talents, and skills of those that have the closest proximity to our social challenges are indispensable to enabling social change. Practitioners working at the grassroots level, and community members themselves, need to take part in collaborative processes in the higher educational context. Already, the engagement of civil society for social impact is a priority for many HEIs. However, this scarcely takes place with marginalized communities at the design and co-creation stages (Busch and Barkema 2019). Opening pathways that allow this type of collaboration would allow HEIs to have an improved alignment with the solutions civil society is already creating in response to these social challenges.

Integration, Inclusion, Social Innovation, and Systems Change

This critical time for HEIs is therefore an opportunity for leadership at different levels to re-imagine cross-sector work through civic engagement. Collaboration and partnerships are considered elemental in the quest to address the complexities of our most pressing societal challenges (Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006). Increasingly, we are seeing examples around the world, and at different institutional levels that have integration and inclusion at the core of these collaborations.

Integration

Closer integration of civil society in order to catalyze the co-creation of more effective solutions is necessary. This could promote innovative alternatives for the benefit of everyone, and not only the benefit of those that can afford these innovations.

In-person, virtual, and hybrid alternatives of this integration are currently being imagined and built around the world. Adrian Haugabrook, who is working to re-imagine higher education, proposes that universities, together with governments and companies, could "invest deeply in a higher education superhighway that allows for the fluidity and the transferability of experiences from place to place, from workplace to the classroom" (Haugabrook 2021). He

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proposes this with a specific emphasis on those for whom participating in higher education has not normally been a choice. New and exciting alternatives, such as Ashoka's Changemaker Talent Exchange and Impact Ecosystem™, are being built to provide a systemic approach to promote the development of *society's capacity to create and effect positive social change*[ii].

Another example is how Kings College London[iii] created a strategic vision of collaboration and partnerships called Vision 2029 (King's College London 2016). Inspired by the work on the 'civic university' (Goddard and Vallance 2006; Goddard et al. 2016), Kings College is exploring what civic engagement means in the context of an HEI. They have engaged in listening to communities in different boroughs of London, mapping the local needs against the strengths of the university and seeing London as a living classroom. In this way, they ensure that there is an emphasis on co-design research with these communities for their mutual benefit. At the heart of this vision is the integration of different perspectives and the co-creation of "solutions to local challenges, provid[ing] exceptional and practical learning opportunities." (Bull 2021). These collaborations are characterized by aiming to be long-term partnerships with members of local communities rather than special projects or one-off initiatives (Bull 2021).

Inclusion

The urgency of society's most pressing issues requires the inclusion of the perspectives of those with the closest proximity to these issues. Deeper collaboration among practitioners, academics, and institutional leadership could catalyze more effective social innovations. Furthermore, the inclusion of the perspectives, experiences and expertise of those that live in marginalized communities could increasingly ground these innovations at the design and co-creation levels. Collaboration at the design level of effective solutions needs to systematically incorporate the perspectives of those for whom solutions are a matter of tangible urgency and who have the ability to lead change in their own communities.

Inclusion "implies that a concerted effort is required to bring in the "excluded", marginalized or disenfranchised" (George et al. 2019, 2). It also points to the "structural and systemic barriers that reinforce this exclusion, making it challenging to be inclusive" (George et al. 2019, 2). Our global track record in trying to ameliorate poverty and its consequences shows that poverty is where "the innovation rubber really hits the road" (Stott and Tracey 2018, 1). Yet, studies and research on how marginalized communities are co-creators rather than beneficiaries of initiatives of social impact, are at best, scarce (Busch and Barkema 2019).

Institutionally, different models could provide pathways for more inclusion. Kromydas (2017) proposes building models through which higher education's intrinsic role of providing context for human development has the same level of importance as being an instrument for economic progress. These kinds of hybrid models could provide policymakers and other leaders "a way forward to create educational systems that are more inclusive and societies that are more knowledgeable and just" (Kromydas 2017, 1).

Changemaker Education[iv] includes partnerships with colleges and universities in the US and internationally. Leading institutions, designated as Ashoka Changemaker Campuses[v], continue to define and develop Changemaker Education itself as they work towards graduating changemakers in their campuses (Budinich, Raine, and Wells 2022). There are 42 Changemaker Campuses around the world, which, as Changemaker Institutions "embrace social innovation, both as an educational framework and as a strategy for institutional change" (Kim, Krampetz, and Ansari 2018, 28). Examples of their work include Universidad de Barrios[vi] (Neighborhoods University) at the Universidad de Monterrey, in Mexico. A program that invites members of marginalized communities to get equipped as leaders and implement change in their own communities. This program continues to grow through the participation of members of these communities at the design level.

Social Innovation and Systems Change

Promisingly, the number of exceptional academic programs, institutional networks, collaborations and partnerships in the field of social innovation and Changemaker Education are growing. Leaders at HEIs are opening powerful pathways at the institutional level, and beyond institutional walls. Given the instrumental role that HEIs have in "influencing systems to change leadership across society" (Budinich, Raine, and Wells 2022, 162), it would be important to reflect on how those involved in leading social change in this context think and act.

For example, when considering cross-sector work, the term "social extrapreneurship" (Tracey and Stott 2017, 51) has been offered to categorize the work of social innovators involved in "inter-organizational action that facilitates alternative combinations of ideas, people, places and resources to address social challenges" (Tracey and Stott 2017, 53). Theory built around this typology and activity focuses on institutional work (Lawrence and Dover 2015), institutional entrepreneurship (Tracey, Phillips, and Jarvis 2011), and extra-institutional entrepreneurship (King and Soule 2007). This is relevant because it lifts the kinds of activities that social innovators do at this level when co-creating potential new solutions and when "develop[ing] a range of support mechanisms for the 'ecosystems' and 'platforms' that shape social change" (Moore and Westley 2011; Nambisan 2009; Wallin 2011, in Tracey and Stott 2017, 55).

The work of Ashoka[vii], which envisions "a world where all citizens are powerful and contribute to change in positive ways" (Ashoka, n.d.), has also much to offer in this respect. A recent study, consulting 120 system changers from the current network of 4000 Ashoka Fellows and tapping into the 40 years of Ashoka's expertise (Budinich, Raine and Wells 2022), provides a distillation of capabilities of system changers around the world. These capabilities are: "building purpose through empathy, embracing continuous change, having the courage to be different, being biased to action, and collaborating for impact." (Budinich, Raine and Wells 2022, 154).

There is much to say about the capabilities of systems changers and their leadership. Given the space in this article, however, suffice to say that "system changers operate with an open heart and fluid boundaries. By viewing others […] as partners and collaborating with them

for impact" (Budinich, Raine and Wells 2022, 157). This openness of heart and collaboration for impact can create change that is positive for everyone.

Conclusions

The challenges of our time in the context of higher education provide a window of opportunity through which the way in which HEIs engage with our most pressing social issues can be re-imagined and co-designed. This paper proposes the need to open pathways of cross-sectoral work, through inclusion and integration, with those that experience the closest proximity to our most pressing social challenges.

Examples of initiatives around the world through which civil society is invited to co-design research and co-create solutions for social impact together with HEIs show that we are moving in the right direction. These strategies are being developed and successfully implemented. Noticeably, however, they need to increasingly include and integrate the participation of members of poor and marginalized communities at the design and co-creation stages. In this respect, there is still a long way to go.

Finally, this paper highlights the ways of thinking and operating of those that are leading social change for systemic problems. Emphasizing, on the one hand, a new typology, social extrapreneurship, which elucidates the activities of social innovators in cross-sectoral work. And on the other hand, highlighting the capabilities that system changers display in their approach to new solutions, particularly their ability to collaborate for impact.

This time of rapid change and political and economic downturn presents many challenges for HEIs but also opens windows of opportunity to change the trajectory of their involvement with society's most pressing challenges. We have much to re-imagine and re-create together.

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[i] In 2018, 1200 community leaders, artists, activists, scholars, investors, social entrepreneurs and innovators gathered at the annual Skoll World Forum to discuss The Power of Proximity to discuss how '[i]n order to address

inequality and injustice, we must more deeply understand the status quo – and how to disrupt it' and the powerful role that working in closeness, from within or side-by-side, has in the finding of solutions for these social challenges.

ii Please refer to the Changemaker Talent Exchange & Impact Ecosystem™ article by Bob Spoer and Heather MacCleoud in this SIJ special issue for a full overview of the current state of this innovation.

iii https://www.kcl.ac.uk/

iv https://ashokacanada.org/programs/changemaker-education/

v https://ashokau.org/changemaker-campus-overview

vi https://www.udem.edu.mx/es/institucional/noticia/gradua-udem-lideres-comunitarios-y-agentes-de-cambio

vii https://www.ashoka.org/en-us/about