Three pillars that influence the university and how they can be used as change drivers in a future scenario

DEBATING DEVELOPMENT PAPER

EDGAR GOOSSENS, NATHAN CENCIARELI PINHEIRO TURQUETTI, NELIDA BENITEZ Y ALMENARA, RAMADAN GADEH AND SAVANA GEYSELS

Introduction

In contemporary history, there has been a trend in higher education to revise often elitist practices to evolve into a more inclusive form of education. Nonetheless, upon scrutiny of these institutions, ivory remnants can be found in the cracks of the more recent layers of paint with which they have been coated. This essay aims to closely examine these cracks and seek forms of paint and adhesives that prevent them from resurfacing. As the multitude of facets in which these cracks can be found is quite substantial, it would be more beneficial to analyse only a handful of them to gain a more thorough understanding of the intricacies they entail. Naturally, providing adequate alternatives to the currently superficially inclusive university is only possible when a thorough understanding of the following aspects has been achieved.

The first essential aspect of the contemporary university is its structure. It is often considered incontestable that this structure is inherently capitalistic. Universities are no longer solely institutions for knowledge production and transmission but have evolved into brands and corporations. This capitalistic system is further developed and encouraged by certain parameters, among which university rankings, a lack of interdisciplinarity, archaic teaching methods, and a dependence on outside funding from private organisations with capitalistic goals can be classified. For universities to be truly inclusive, they must forgo these parameters and implement alternative strategies that allow more individuals to receive higher education.

Secondly, universities often seem more inclusive than they are due to their recurrent tokenistic promotional campaigns. This is again due to their capitalistic nature, as they attempt to appear inclusive to attract possible streams of income; students and organisations alike. This act of superficial inclusion is exceptionally harmful as it conceals the systemic inequalities and discrimination that transpire within the very institutions that market themselves as progressive. Tokenism also serves as a shield to protect universities from criticism as they can claim that certain performative practices create a completely non-discriminatory character. Universities must acknowledge these actions as performative, and address and transform them so that they truly eliminate systemic discrimination.

The final aspect of the contemporary university discussed in this essay is the financial dependence of universities in the Global South on universities in the Global North, more specifically the possibility of academic decolonization and the economic consequences this process would have. This essay aims to find solutions that provide universities in the Global South with the opportunity to distance themselves from the aforementioned practices. This allows them to pursue and incorporate alternative forms of education that are more in line with their cultural practices and generational knowledge. However, acknowledging the economic consequences a sudden distancing would bring, this essay intends to provide an alternative plan in which academic decolonization would be a gradual process.

Pillar 1- The university structure

The concept of universities has been around for centuries, with the first educational institutions arising in ancient Greece around 500 BC. These institutions evolved throughout human history, major shifts happened in the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution up to the current globalized and technologically advanced institutions they are today. The role of universities and the subjects taught there have expanded massively, while the structure of how they operate has stayed relatively the same over the past five centuries. Teaching principles, student-teacher dynamics, and much more fundamental ideas and values are still present today. In this paper, 5 structural parameters active in universities are defined and their age, relevance, and possible innovations are put into perspective.

The first parameter is the class dynamic. Here a seemingly omniscient lecturer stands in front of a group of not-as-educated students who are silent, listen, and take notes. While there are exceptions, this is currently the structure of the majority of classes. Using modern knowledge and technology, this dynamic can be overhauled and experimented with starting from principles of engaged learning. This can be done by generating more creative environments through the use of digital tools and by creating the freedom to learn through the digitalization of subject matter.

Exams and knowledge testing also still function based on old principles. While they traditionally attempted to answer the question 'Does this student comprehend the subject matter and are they able to reproduce and apply it?', exams have often strayed away from this question, solely evaluating reproduction or comprehension. This is most likely because an innovative way of knowledge testing would have to be created to effectively evaluate the comprehension of and the ability to reproduce and apply subject matter. While this is possible, doing so requires a lot of time and effort.

The third parameter is the strict fixed schedule most universities provide. This schedule is communicated at the beginning of the academic year, without any external input from the people involved taken into consideration. These often collide with students' schedules or prohibit them from choosing their own. Since students prioritize their education, as is necessary for them to effectively manage their courses, finding ways to make teaching schedules more flexible will give them more freedom and responsibility regarding the processing of subject matter. A more flexible schedule could also alleviate pressure on teachers. Some possible alternatives to the current fixed schedule are project-based learning and digital content such as pre-recorded lectures.

Pertaining to this is the fourth parameter, namely the requirement of students' presence on university grounds. As most theoretical courses are taught in a lecture hall or classroom and are often not recorded, students are obligated to attend these lectures. However, this can be seen as an archaic approach to transferring information and knowledge as the internet has been doing so digitally for over twenty years while continuously improving. Despite the implementation of superficial modern tools such as slide shows and smartboards, the use of two-hour-long lectures with a five-minute break, requiring students' constant focus and physical presence is an antiquated format that screams for innovation.

The fifth and final parameter is the reliance on scientific and measurable results. A dependence on measuring equals a dependence on technology, thus ensuring that reality can only be true within the range of what can be measured at the current state of technological evolution. However, this is a Western-centric approach to science and knowledge acquisition, especially because it dismisses generations of knowledge purely because this knowledge cannot be proven or measured using our current technology. Involving multiple narratives and truths, saying 'we don't know yet' and acknowledging shortcomings all play major roles in the limitations of what role a university can play in society.

Pillar 2- Tokenism within the university

Universities play a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual landscape of society and are often regarded as bastions of diversity, tolerance, and inclusion. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on fostering diverse and inclusive environments within academic institutions. However, the implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives has not been without its challenges, and one such challenge is the phenomenon of tokenism. Tokenism is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups in order to give the appearance of diversity without addressing systemic issues. Diversity without inclusion and equity often perpetuates tokenism.

Universities have developed diversity and inclusion policies as a response to evolved societal expectations and norms. However, the implementation of these policies often falls short due to tokenistic practices. While the institutions focus on meeting numerical quotas, the underlying issues that contribute to the underrepresentation of certain groups remain unaddressed. This lack of comprehensive action can lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes and a failure to create a truly inclusive environment.

Such is often the case with faculty members of colour. The university tokenizes and relies on them as symbols of diversity and inclusivity without addressing systemic issues. The majority of faculty members are typically solely expected to excel in their roles as teachers and scholars, while the minority faculty are burdened with additional responsibilities related to diversity. The extra workload the minority faculty members perform is often overlooked by the institutions and could even impede their professional development and success. By pushing these hidden service requirements on the minority faculty, the senior faculty and administrators avoid any direct involvement in diversity initiatives and evade accountability when an initiative fails, while simultaneously reaping the benefits in case of success. These practices not only hinder actual deep-rooted institutional change, they also lead to both explicit and implicit forms of racism.

Tokenism and its effect should be avoided, although trying to eradicate it can make the challenge extremely difficult as the experience of tokenism is subjective. We should remain aware of a transition phase where we research tokenism being experienced, where the intention was to honestly include. As articulated by Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, the Dean of Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy, and the Carlos Montezuma Professor of Education and Social Policy, "To advance the agenda of diversity, institutions that truly value diversity must move toward considering wholesale changes in their underlying structures and day-to-day activities, especially if they are truly committed to refocusing the historical legacies of institutional, epistemological, and societal racisms that pervade colleges and universities." This resonates with the proposition that universities must transcend tokenistic endeavours and undertake actions that surpass superficial pronouncements, to

take concrete actions that go further than a single statement, quote, post, or action. When something requires effort, there is a need for intention. Projects that require true intention and effort will show by themselves that inclusivity is actively being pursued.

Posting and social media make this a tough sea to navigate since a business or university will post about everything they do, which often makes these projects seem like publicity stunts. This problem can be avoided by asking participants and endorsed figures in the community to write honest reviews, and making the publicity come from external sources. Doing so shifts away from a negative connotation and the attempt to fit a narrative, making the narrative choose the project instead.

Pillar 3 – The decolonization and de-financialization of the university

Since the early stages of universities, the connection between society and academics has always been strong. Traditionally, universities contributed to society through activities such as educating administrators, creating useful knowledge for societal demands, and promoting economic development for growth (Benneworth, 2012). As society has evolved, so has the university; however, the principle of benefiting society has lost its importance after the rise of the capitalist model. Instead, higher education now follows a market-beneficial model, leading to the neglect of society and its citizens (Benneworth, 2012). Due to this shift, it can be argued that universities currently shape their research and development in function of the market, increasing their reliance on market mechanisms (Geuna, 2016).

However, universities entail more than merely research, they are environments where young minds come together, gaining access to a variety of different studies that can fuel their research possibilities. Therefore, the university model should not focus solely on market trends, but on important discussions and programs on sustainable development as well as sustainability and inclusion mechanisms. Doing so can create a balance between market-oriented research and aiding society, an arguably beneficial outcome.

What benefits would society gain from a financialized university system? As economies grow in function of market demand, academic studies would support this development while simultaneously limiting and providing solutions for adverse effects such as inequality and unsustainable growth models.

As for the geographic differences, economically disadvantaged regions such as Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia mostly experience an ongoing dependence on the North. This can largely be attributed to their colonial past and constant exploitation. For centuries, resources have been extracted from the Global South to sustain the economic development of the Global North, delaying further economic and academic development in the South. Due to this, they faced a substantial disparity with the Global North after gaining their purported independence, which could be observed through a lack of development in most industries, a lack of natural resources, and unstable political and economic systems. Thus, this explains the dependence these regions continue to have on more economically developed regions in the Global North.

The question that remains is how we can ensure that universities in the Global South continue to enjoy financial stability and growth after eliminating their dependence on the Global North, which limits the academic freedom of the dependent universities.

Education is a crucial tool in triggering the development of a country. Educated citizens are specialized in and help the growth of different fields within a country, ultimately helping its economy grow. As the Global South has fewer educated citizens than the Global North, investing in education could be an exemplary way to foster sustainable economic growth.

Decolonisation is the term used to explain the complete transition toward an independent Global South (Acosta, 2018), which can be achieved by investing in education and academic research. Nevertheless, the path to decolonisation remains unclear considering the diverse economic and political conditions in each country. However, as the world economy requires financial means to make trades, the Global South wholly distancing itself from Western monetary trends would not be the optimal solution. Instead, a redistribution of wealth and resources, combined with a mutual desire from both parties to push development in less developed regions would be a more adequate solution. What mechanisms can be used to achieve this goal?

Universities and the educational system in the Global South need to rely on Western institutions to develop their own. A number of these institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, currently exist. The former helps redistribute resources from the Global North to the Global South, while the latter closely monitors the health of economic systems. However, due to the poor tracking of funds and high levels of political instability in the regions monitored, it is impossible to see whether resources are being properly invested, especially when they are destined for education. The effort needs to come from the Global North to track the funds' allocations and require a percentage to be invested in education, which will be the engine for economically disadvantaged regions' development — which would ideally take the form of a global auditing body with the power to investigate resource allocation. As a result, these regions would see more educated citizens. The development of independent academic research will improve their overall industries as well as institutions in the following decades.

For the North, investing in these regions is highly beneficial, since it will bring more competition to the world economy, less inequality, and more stability. At an academic level, it will promote a more connected world with diverse levels of research being carried out worldwide, as well as ongoing development in different fields. This leads to more contributions to existent work, thus resulting in the exponential progress of humanity. In addition, a stable and developed South, leaving behind its colonial past, can also then defiantly invest in their own research (Patricia et al, 2022). They can achieve this by differing from the West and focusing on their specific diverse past and characteristics. At this stage, they would already have the proper resources, stable institutions, and educated citizens.

Conclusion

When combining the aforementioned three pillars, consistencies appear in the solution field. The first necessary consistency would be a profound perspective shift. The research shows that universities lack self-reflection and actions aligned with it. If the universities of the future want to innovate, eradicate tokenism, definancialize, and decolonize they will have to radically evaluate themselves and both ask and answer confronting questions.

Firstly, restating their visions, ambitions, and goals in alignment with the concepts in the discussed pillars is crucial. The question, 'If we would build a new university from the ground up, what would it look like?' could help in using all the modern knowledge when visualizing a modern university.

A second consistency across all pillars is the scale of the required change. Research shows that in modern society, slow change means falling behind on current values. Therefore, universities only implementing superficial changes will not suffice in our rapidly evolving society. Instead, they need to identify key aspects that will result in the most positive leverage effect when changed and thoroughly invest in them; an example given in the paper is the partial digitalization of education. The adjustments of these aspects can swiftly bring radical changes, while the actions currently being taken, such as tokenistic promotional campaigns, do not result in fundamental change. Ultimately, refusing to implement and invest in radical changes will lead to a growing discrepancy between society's needs and universities' services.

If the universities of the future take these consistencies into account when designing their off- and online infrastructure, they will become more autonomous, more flexible, more inclusive, and more impactful.

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Contribution paragraph

E.G, N.B, N.C, and S.G attended group meetings, brainstormed ideas and defined the scope of the research. E.G, N.B, N.C, and S.G wrote the group essay after which N.B. proofread it and rewrote parts to ensure the essay is one coherent whole. E.G, N.B, N.C, and S.G actively participated in the podcast which was then edited by N.B.

E.G, N.B, N.C, and S.G collectively agreed on deadlines and kept track of the timeline.

R.G. attended two group meetings, but did not provide much insight and did not participate in any other part of the assignment.