The New Imperialism in Higher Education and a Collective Voice in the Balkan Region

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Regional Strategic Forum
organised under the scheme of STREW Tempus Project and Novi Sad Initiative,

26 September 2012

Venue:
Centre for Advanced Academic Studies Dubrovnik of the University of Zagreb, Don Frana Bulića 4, 20000 Dubrovnik, Croatia, acronym CAAS

Host:
University of Zagreb

Under the auspices of:
Higher Education Authority of Ireland, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, and Regional Cooperation Council

With participation of:
HEIs/HEAs leadership, representatives of international organisation and international experts
I would like to thank Professor Ladislav Novak and the Centre of Advanced Academic Study for this opportunity to engage in these most important and pressing discussions on the future of higher education. It is a double pleasure to escape the English weather and to end up in one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Professor Ladislav Novak has asked me to provide a small paper on whether a collective voice in the region consisting of several small countries with no critical mass in HE could prevent new imperialism in higher education in the course of ascension to the EU.

I want to start by briefly describing what we mean by the term the new imperialism. We know that, despite the end of the cold war, the hierarchical ordering of nation states remains. Ray Kiely (2006) and David Harvey (2003) show us how dominant states and their allies deploy political, military and economic strategies to search for new areas for capitalist accumulation. We also understand that states exist in complex relations of power with transnational corporations and international organisations. While national borders are sometimes penetrated by military means, they are more routinely penetrated by economic and political measures. These strategies give access to markets, raw materials, and strategic geopolitical positions. In addition, while classical rivalries were legitimated by conceptions of race in the colonial period (see Tikly, 2004), or the war on communism in the cold war period, it is religion that is now deployed to explain conflict. In addition, the rise of China, a one-party state with a giant economy and the capacity for high value-added
innovation has the potential to disrupt global power relations. China has adopted a policy of non-interference. It provides aid with no explicit conditions to low income countries. China has also referred to its own 100 years of humiliation at the hands of colonising powers. It has challenged governance measures which place developing countries at a disadvantage. Low income countries are therefore drawn into shifting multi-polar regimes of power under China’s influence (see Henderson, 2008).

Higher education stands at the centre of these rivalries. It is positioned as central to knowledge based advantage in the global economy. In developing countries, higher education has shifted from being viewed as an unaffordable luxury to being a powerhouse for development. Older rationales for cross border activities are now complemented by the view of higher education as a source of institutional and national revenue. As Eva Hartmann (2008) shows, the Bologna process in Europe can be seen as a strategy to challenge the dominant role of the USA. The export of Bologna to Africa and Latin America increases Europe's market share of higher education as well as its sphere of influence (see Robertson, 2009). There are also increasing research partnerships across borders. These collaborations are sometimes related to securing competitive advantage. There are also wider aims such as China’s higher education partnerships with 49 African countries to promote knowledge based sustainable development.
As I have shown in previous work, the rivalry between nations is also a race for influence through which states assert their own preferred political, economic and cultural models (see Naidoo, 2011). And of course, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has indicated, the nation is in some ways an imaginary community with deep internal differences. So what we are really talking about are the visions of powerful groups in a country. And here too higher education is implicated. We know from the sociology of education that values are transported across borders through explicit and ‘hidden’ cross-border educational strategies. There are also more explicit initiatives. In the USA, we have the Patriot Act of 2001 which has linked universities to concerns with national security. Richard Riley, a former US Secretary of Education, has called on higher education to promote the country’s diplomatic interests with the rest of the world. And China has deployed what commentators have called soft power to set up 272 Confucius Institutes in universities in around 88 countries to disseminate Chinese culture. China has also set up the African Cultural Visitors Program and the African Human Resources Development Foundation.

The term tries to capture the idea that countries exist in hierarchical relationships with other countries, with regional and global bodies and with major capitalist corporations. Power is not in general exercised by military means but by economic and political means. Borders are not dissolved but are penetrated through economic and political instruments which give access to markets, raw materials and strategic geo-political influence.
It is also important to place the discussions today in the context of the region’s historical position of independence and the turmoil and the transformations that have taken place in the last two decades. In this context we can see the rise of the European Union and European projects such as Bologna as a major centrifugal force with many benefits. In the global knowledge economy all universities desire global connection, global capacity and success as measured by recognised templates. Being connected to the European Union offers all these opportunities—and more.

At the same time a very interesting seminar that I attended in Liubiana presented research which showed that leaders of higher education were concerned that the region was positioned as peripheral. So we also have the centre-periphery dynamic with all the attendant threats of whether the region will retain its identity, its independence and its voice. And so a collective regional voice in the form of regional platform is a very important initiative. It can build capacity, share good practice and act as a powerful counterbalance to the dominance of the more powerful European member states.

I want to point to a few issues that may be important to consider in the building of the regional platform. How does the region speak on some issues with a collective voice while respecting the diversity within the region? What to do about dominance, competition and hierarchy within the region. But also
importantly, these same tensions will also exist in the relation between the region and the European Union. How does one gain European and global connectivity while retaining respect for local variation?

Many of the issues that you are discussing today such as benchmarking come under the guise of technical mechanisms to measure and improve system performance. But these mechanisms are neither value free nor politically neutral. The mechanisms of hard governance such as contracts, regulations and legislation as well as modes of soft governance through expert guidance, peer pressure and comparative indicators have immense seductive and coercive power. Benchmarking can be a tool for policy learning but it can also be a tool for naming, shaming and blaming! So what I am trying to say is that underlying all these procedures and systems of measurement are particular models of what successful higher education is. These procedures do not simply collect data but also steer higher education towards valuing certain outcomes such as employability and economic profitability while undervaluing other outcomes. So it is important to step back throughout these processes to analyse how the outcomes that are encouraged and what is excluded contribute to building particular types of higher education systems and whether these are the sorts of systems you want.

And finally policy travel can also take agency away from local actors in shaping higher education according to the needs of the region. Policy often travels from
powerful countries to less powerful ones even when the local conditions are very
different. I think it is very important to understand what aspects can be imported
and what not. It is also important to not merely look at the successes of
dominant models but also the failures learn from some aspects of other countries
such as Brazil and Singapore and to also develop indigenous innovations.

It is also important to protect higher education as a space for critical analysis and
dialogue. We need to resist the pressure to see higher education purely as a space
for consumption or a lever for economic development where ideas are validated in
purely instrumental terms. Post-conflict processes such as in the region call for
research in understanding what happened and why, and how to rebuild democratic
governance systems that address some of the issues that led to conflict in the first
place. We can do this in two ways. First, through the curriculum. Philosophers
writing on education from John Dewey to Martha Nussbaum have all pointed to the
danger of seeing education purely in terms of employment and short term economic
benefit. They point to the erosion of the liberal arts and humanities worldwide and
argue that we are producing docile, technically trained machines rather than citizens
with critical reasoning. They argue that there is a risk that education is not
contributing to the development of individuals who can empathise with the suffering
of near and distant others and who can identify the most serious threats that
democracy faces in a world dominated by instrumental reasoning.
Second, in many countries public understandings and discussion of the key challenges we face are channelled by commercial media with its own specific interests. An important role for higher education could be to provide an alternative space for public discussion. This could be grounded in Jurgen Habermas’s idea of a public sphere which is independent of government and economic and religious interests. It encompasses the idea of people having a voice and the right to be heard, no matter what their status in society is. One area for discussion could be contributions to the national and the global public good. The resolution of issues surrounding environment, emergency and economy depends not only on national governments but on the identification of global public goods secured by international agreement and collaboration. The main ways in which global public goods have been thought about in the past have been in economic terms of non-rivalry and non-excludability. They also affect more than one group of countries, are broadly available within countries, and meet needs in the present generation without jeopardizing future generations (Kaul, Grunberg and Stern, 1999). However, what the standard economic definition misses is that global public goods do not occur naturally in society but are socially defined and continuously contested. Higher education can therefore contribute not merely to creating public fora to define what global public goods are but also to discuss global governance and how to finance global public goods. In addition, we need to contribute to and support independent alternative forums which disseminate news and analysis.
Even more fundamental is how we define education's contribution to the development of world societies. We are as always in danger of prioritising economic growth as an end in itself. The university's role in human capital development is emphasised. It is assumed that once growth is assured, other needs will trickle down. However, these dominant ideas about the development of world societies have been severely tested by recent crises and a number of critical accounts have appeared. In this conference we have heard critiques of the high skills thesis from Simon McGrath and Kenneth King. Philip Brown, Hugh Lauder and Dave Ashton in *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes* (2011) take these critiques further by challenging the obsession in government policy on higher education expansion. They argue that competitive labour markets in countries such as China enable global capital to exploit and reproduce global inequality by forcing down the price of skills and delivering a diminishing bonus to graduates. Robert Wade (2003) argues that regulations arising from multilateral economic organizations, international treaties and bilateral agreements shrink the development space and development policy options open to developing countries. These rules actively prevent developing countries from pursuing the kinds of industrial and technology policies adopted by the newly developed countries of East Asia and by the older developed countries when they were developing. He argues that this is a modern version of kicking away the ladder.

An alternative and promising framework that has emerged more recently is the ‘Wellbeing Regimes’ framework developed by Ian Gough, Geof Wood and others
(Gough and Wood, 2007; Gough and McGregor, 2007). It draws on the work of Esping Anderson and Amayta Sen. What is important about the framework is that it captures the complicated landscape of what well-being in society really means. It analyses both macro structures as well as more subjective elements such as people's values. It does not have a one size fits all model but is capable of analyzing a range of different state forms including fragile and franchise states. It includes organizations above the state such as multi-national corporations and international organizations and those below the state such as non-governmental organizations and religious and civil groups. It argues for human beings and their quality of life to be the central focus of policy. This stands in opposition to so much policy which focuses on the means to provide quality of life as an end in itself. In other words, economic development is not seen as an end in itself but in service of these other aims. Well being refers to an individual's right to health, autonomy, security and other fundamental aspects to achieve quality of life and it is seen as a process and not purely as an outcome. Rather than treating people as objects of development policy, it focuses on people's own subjective understanding of wellbeing and their own ability to make decisions individually and collectively.

I wish to conclude by suggesting that it is these sorts of visions of education that the region should address. Thank you for your kind attention.

References


