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Globalization and learning across the higher education sector - at the other extreme

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Commonly the analysis of higher education and globalization distorts the concept of higher education by presenting it with a strong bias towards the research function of institutions and by presenting arguments only significant for a small proportion of considerably well-resourced institutions around the world, the so called ‘world class universities’. Following a brief critique of the use of the term ‘globalization’, the paper reviews the size and distribution of the higher education sector globally, highlighting the inadequacy of the image of the sector as presented through prominent ranking systems, while noting where most growth in student numbers actually appears to be occurring.

Through observations drawn from three institutions, well outside ‘world rankings’, the paper then presents a quite different understanding of the interaction between globalization and higher education. A consideration of the issues faced by these institutions (one in Timor Leste, another in China, and the third in Vietnam) challenges our current thinking on globalization. The not uncommon reality is one of institutions having severely limited resources and an extremely challenging teaching and learning environment in which their staff and students have to function. When considering the full spectrum of higher education institutions, globalization appears at most partial. Its interaction with many institutions around the world is limited and in some situations harmful.

Keywords: elitism; globalization; inequality

Globalization and higher education as commonly presented

Globalisation is “an imperative”, said Eric Thomas, president of Universities UK, when he opened a World Universities Network conference at Bristol in February last year (Docherty, 2013). The home page of this conference elaborates these sentiments (HERDSA Conference 2014). Musselin (2011, p. 461) went so far as to claim:

It is probably impossible to nowadays find a policy statement on higher education that does not start with a sentence close to ‘In a globalized world… higher education plays a critical role ….

The claimed connection between globalization and higher education is certainly very pervasive in the literature and in proclamations by sector leaders. “Globalization is here, it is not going away, and those that embrace it will benefit the most”, claimed Wood (2012). This almost matches that old mantra ‘publish or perish’. The call is close to ‘globalize or perish’.

The claim to be producing graduates who are going to be ‘global citizens’ is made on numerous institutional websites. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics website for higher education opens with:
The demand for higher education has never been greater as universities compete globally to attract students. (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013)

Is it? Do they? Do they all? Just how significant is globalization right across the sector?

In 2007, Marginson and van der Wende made use of the simple and functional definition of ‘globalisation’ as “the widening, deepening and speeding up of world wide interconnectedness”, from Held et.al. (1999, p. 2). While they noted that “globalisation is not a single or universal phenomenon”, they recognised that:

research-intensive universities, and the smaller number of vocational universities organised as global international businesses, tend to be the most implicated in globalisation. (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 5)

And further, that:

in reality only a small proportion of worldwide higher education institutions falls within this description. (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 34)

The focus on research-intensive universities is widespread, as evidenced in the recent work on globalization in Korea by Kim (2013), in China by Li and Chen (2011) and Yang (2011), and in Singapore by Collins and Ho (2012). What of the ‘non-research-intensive universities’? How big is the group that constitutes these lesser-implicated universities? What is the extent of the influence of globalization on these institutions?

Some authors have taken a more critical view of the phenomenon of globalization in a broader socio-political and economic context. In 2003, Yang highlighted, the unequal economic, cultural and educational exchanges continuing to take place in the context of globalization, aiming “to counter the uncritical acceptance of globalization as a positive force for higher education and society as a whole” (p. 269). Currie, critiquing a neo-liberal paradigm of globalization, highlighted the potential for global economic forces to:

segment and divide societies and the world into different types of players: those who initiate globalization, those tho are affected by it, and those who are left out of it’. (Currie, 2004, p. 42)

Altbach (2011, 2004), referred to later in this paper, also takes a critical stance.

However, most writers could be criticized for failing to consider the full spectrum of institutions, focussing only on those universities that have a high national or international profile, typically characterised as ‘research-intensive’.

**The size and distribution of the sector globally**

How many universities are there in the world? The website ‘Universities Worldwide’ on November 10, 2013, identified 9,110 universities in 204 countries. At the same time, the ‘Ranking Web of Universities’ site claimed 21,451 institutions in 205 countries. It is difficult to identify the data sources and collection processes used to generate these figures. None of the three institutions that are the focus later in this paper were listed on these websites, though
each institution had a website with some parallel pages in English. However, the figures are worthy of some consideration.

The International Association of Universities claims 615 member institutions from 117 countries, with 24% drawn from Asia and the Pacific. The Association identifies its members as:

universities or degree-conferring higher education institutions whose main objective is teaching and research, irrespective of whether or not they carry the name of a university. (International Association of Universities, 2013)

Each of the institutions discussed later satisfies the requirements of this definition.

**The role of world rankings**

Do world university rankings accurately reflect the sector? Two ranking systems are given great prominence in the higher education literature. The ‘Times Higher Education World University Rankings’ publishes rankings for 400 universities and claims to provide:

the only global university performance tables to judge world class universities across all of their core missions – teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook. (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2013)

Often overlooked and unquestioned in these rankings is the reference to ‘world class’, and the determination that just 400 such institutions exist. In 2012-13 the institutions came from just 24 of the approximately 200 nations of the world.

The Shanghai Jiao Tong University ‘Academic Ranking of World Universities’, also ranks ‘world-class’ institutions. Here 500 institutions are ranked, and in 2013 26 countries were represented. That year a press release described the rankings as “recognized as the precursor of global university rankings” (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2013). The three institutions considered later in this paper were obviously not included in either list.

The prominence of these rankings in the sector is significant because of the publicity and credence they are given by elite institutions and the dominance of the ‘voice’ of such institutions in the sector. However, it is important to recognize just how partial they are as a global representation of the sector. If a conservative figure of approximately 9,000 is taken as the number of higher education institutions worldwide, then the rankings include approximately 5% of the total. For 95% of institutions, if indeed they are aware of these rankings, the question is not how well will they be ranked, but will they be ranked at all.

**Global students and the impact of sector growth**

Docherty (2013), in The Times Higher Education Supplement, January 2013, stated there were roughly 140 million students worldwide but claimed only 2% of these “participate as ‘global’, international students”, including those “who remain in their home country while being registered for courses ‘delivered’ from another country”, figures broadly consistent with OECD data (OECD, 2012). Arguments supporting globalization of higher education are often linked to growth of the sector in emerging economies. It is highly unlikely that much of this growth is occurring in the institutions listed in the above rankings. Greatest growth appears to be occurring through the establishment of new institutions in locations where the labour
Market, population profile, and aspirations of marginally more affluent communities demand it. In 2010 in China, a higher proportion of students were expected to enter 'tertiary-type B courses' (not intended to lead to further university study) than 'type A' courses (potentially leading to further study) (OECD, 2012). Globally, the percentage of students who progress to advanced research programmes is low, an estimated 2.8% in 2010 in OECD countries with available data (OECD, 2012). It could be argued that global expansion has led to an unnoticed rise of teaching as the dominant function of higher education and a consequent dramatic decline in the place of research across the sector worldwide.

Background to the current analysis

The current analysis draws on participant observations in three higher education institutions that are the antithesis of the world-ranked institutions. For reasons of confidentiality, they are referred to as institutions TL (located in Timor Leste), NWC (in northwest China), and CV (in central Vietnam). The author spent 18 months, 11 months, and 23 months respectively at these institutions, between April 2004 and July 2014, with roles of senior advisor and lecturer at TL, and English teacher/trainer at the other two institutions. Each institution was severely under resourced by Western standards and had a focus almost exclusively on teaching and learning. TL undertook a small amount of local social research on a contract basis to supplement very meagre resources and to provide some income to students who worked as data collectors. Small internal research grants were available at NWC, and at CV a small number of research papers were being written by some of the staff while trying to obtain higher qualifications at other institutions. Student populations at TL and CV were exclusively pre-graduate and undergraduate while NWC had a small but significant postgraduate cohort. Accurate figures on student numbers were difficult to obtain. At the times of the observations, TL had approximately 350 students and was about to graduate its first cohort of degree students; NWC had approximately 14,000 and CV approximately 6,000. TL and CV had growing student populations while student numbers at NWC were nationally controlled and relatively stable. Student cohorts were drawn from across the nation at TL and NWC, but at CV the students were almost exclusively from the province in which the institution was located.

Observed global issues of teaching and learning in three higher education institutions well outside of ‘world class’ status

The following anecdote sets the scene for what is to be presented concerning the three institutions mentioned above. It is indicative of the limitations on poorly resourced institutions when engaging with issues of globalization. The paper was prepared while the author was working in CV.

The University library had no relevant English language background material, and probably nothing relevant in Vietnamese. While attempting to review the literature on-line, using a 3G internet connection and my laptop, on Google Books I came across the “Handbook on Globalization and Higher Education” (King, Marginson & Naidoo, 2011). This was offered as an ebook for 1,041,453 VND (approximately US$50), about equal to a week’s pay for a junior academic at the institution.

I found reference to a relevant article by Altbach (2004) titled “Globalisation and the university: Myths and realities in an unequal world”. The abstract was
available online and sounded promising. Clicking the “Download full text” button produced the response, “Sorry you don’t have access to this article”, and suggested that I either “Recommend to your librarian that your institution purchase access to this publication” or “Add to cart” at US$37. The recommendation to the librarian of our modest library (dominated by a well used class sets of texts) would possibly have been the first ever request for an online publication and simply not understood. The ‘cart’ amount was equivalent to three or four day’s salary or a night’s accommodation at a very comfortable local hotel.

Altbach’s abstract stated:

The purpose of this essay is to “unpack” the realities of globalization and internationalization in higher education and to highlight some of the ways in which globalization affects the university. Of special interest here is how globalization is affecting higher education in developing countries – the nations that will experience the bulk of higher education expansion in the coming decades. (Altbach, 2004, p. 3)

What follows is an ‘unpacking’ of some of the realities from three higher education institutions that will probably never be ‘world class’. The selection of observations has been clustered around themes, and focused on particular issues relevant to globalization and teaching and learning. Some use was made of the conceptualization provided by Biggs’ 3P Model of Teaching and Learning (Biggs, 1996) in selecting and arranging themes. A broad consideration of ‘presage’, ‘process’ and ‘product’ guided the selection of observations, with attempts made to include ‘student factors’, ‘teaching context’, ‘learning-focused activities’ and to a limited extent, ‘learning outcomes’. The observations are selective and brief and in some instances unavoidably subjective.

**Theme 1 The Broad Environmental Context of Each Institution**

*National and local economies*

TL was located in a struggling economy where most of the population was engaged in subsistence agriculture, significantly challenged by the need to redevelop national infrastructure. TL received funding through overseas aid from government, non-government and private sources, as well as from modest student fees. NWC was located in a remote part of China where the mixed economy included large government and private enterprises, medium and small businesses, and ‘survival activities’ commonly related to menial industrial labour or small-scale food production and marketing. Most funding was received from the central government, with students paying a subsidized fee. CV was located nationally within one of the ‘Tiger economies of Asia’, but in a province requiring central government initiatives to generate industrial output, and typified by small agricultural holdings with limited marketing of produce beyond provincial borders. CV was a government institution dominated by free teacher-training courses and a limited number of technical and service-industry focused courses. Global economics had an impact on each institution but the national and local economies appeared much more significant to each institution.

*Scarcity, rationing and access*

TL had high status nationally, a consequence of the perceived quality of the staff, the presence of ex-patriot staff, and institutional links with prominent local individuals. Students were proud of their status as students at TL. At NWC students were vaguely aware of a national
pecking order of institutions and often dissatisfied that they had been unable to obtain a place at a better institution. The perceived ‘best university’ in the province was used as the primary reference point for judging other institutions. At CV many students appreciated, without question, the opportunity to be a university student. For others, there was an awareness that family circumstances and failure to achieve better results at school had resulted in them having no option but to attend the provincial institution.

In each institution, availability of places was seen as nationally determined, limited by local economic conditions and by internally exercised political power. No foreign universities had a physical presence in the cities where the universities were located.

**Theme 2: Institutional Considerations**

*Institutional purpose, profile and image*
TL and CV web pages clearly linked their purposes to meeting the needs of local economies for labour, and consequently benefitting the national economy. NWC espoused a purpose of providing opportunities for ethnic minority students, while informally more cynical views of purpose were sometimes expressed. It should also be noted that some of the actions of the institutions appeared to take the form of ‘mimicry’ referred to by King, Marginson and Naidoo (2011), presenting a somewhat artificial image, e.g. one institution was proud to have produced a ‘university calendar’ which was something of a ‘show document’, an expected artifact of a reputable institution rather than a functional reference for staff and students.

*Management structures and processes*
Management structures and processes in each institution illustrated some forms of ‘the new public management’ (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 8) but their origins may have been local rather than global, and certainly in NWC and CV a Confucian influence and party political engagement in management was very evident.

*Accountability and accreditation*
TL, governed by an independent board, was required to participate in a national process of accreditation instituted to rationalize and improve standards of higher education. Nationally the process was developed with assistance from a US academic consultant. TL sought assistance from an Australian academic in preparing documentation. NWC, created by the national government to benefit ethnic minority students, drew students from across the entire country, selected on a quota basis. An informally stated expectation was that the broad mix of ethnicities would live and study without discontent and graduate at the end of the time prescribed for their courses. CV produced documentation and submitted this regularly to government as directed, and was required to participate in national approaches to improving standards. A national system of institutional achievement awards operated and achievements were publicized on the CV website. From a student perspective, respect for teachers and institutions of learning meant institutional quality was rarely questioned.

**Theme 3: The Student and Staff Factors**

*The student and staff condition*
Staff and students in all institutions experienced significant distraction from teaching and learning. While there may have been global contributing factors, the disruptions were all national or local in nature.
The majority of local staff at TL had a bachelor’s or master’s degree from Indonesia. The few foreign staff and the head of the institution had higher qualifications from other overseas countries. At NWC staff typically had a master’s degree obtained from another university in the same city or province. Staff at CV, teaching students enrolled for a degree programme, had master’s qualifications commonly obtained from the university in the nearest major city.

At TL teaching and learning was interrupted by illness, civil disturbance and natural disaster. Low and unreliable income for staff necessitated them attempting to find multiple jobs. Students on occasion failed to pay required fees and withdrew as a result.

Most students at NWC had relocated across vast distances, involving personal and family dislocation and significant cultural, social and climatic adjustment. They lived together on an isolated campus in a ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1961) environment.

The high value placed on all forms of education by Vietnamese people and the minimal salaries paid to teachers, resulted in most CV staff running small private schools or home-based classes when they were not teaching. Students also engaged in tutoring school students to supplement meager funds provided by parents.

Individuals in these institutions had little opportunity to contemplate global influences and opportunities.

Employment aspirations of students
Families and students of TL believed that higher education was likely to lead to employment, and more particularly ‘a clean job’ that did not require physical labour. Status and meaning was attached to the role of ‘university student’ while employment opportunities were actually rare and strongly linked to ‘family connections’.

At NWC students had a wide array of employment aspirations, while existing family enterprises, if any, were seen as the most likely employment possibility. Additional higher education opportunities and success at an institution of higher status was an aspiration for some students. National examinations and tests (related to English), external to the university, appeared to count more in relation to employment than obtaining the issued degree.

Students at CV most commonly wanted to work as school teachers, returning to their villages or working elsewhere in the Province. Unfortunately vacancies for teachers at all levels of the school system were becoming scarce due to oversupply and lack of funding.

No students actually expressed an interest in employment beyond national borders though in NWC and CV some expressed an aspiration to work with foreign companies.

The drive to learn English
In all institutions, English competence was believed to improve job prospects. At TL all students were required to study English. Almost no texts existed in the local language. Limited material was available in Indonesian (a language understood by most students). Access to learning through library resources and online was seen as best achieved through an understanding of English.

Similarly, NWC students saw English as critical for interaction and possibly work with foreigners. There was some recognition of English proficiency as a national priority but this
was not related to personal circumstances. Students were curious beyond their national borders and some expressed a desire to travel. English was spoken of as ‘the international language’.

At CV, learning English was recognized as a national priority by staff and students. Non-English major students studied English as a minor, while almost all English majors aspired to become English teachers. Great interest was shown in foreigners and English was seen as the key to facilitating communication and understanding.

**Access to a wider cohort of learners and teachers**

At TL frequent visits by foreign donors and the presence of foreign volunteers in the institution provided limited access to a wider higher education community. Local engagement with other institutions took the form of meetings, workshops and small conferences. Some staff had obtained assistance to obtain an overseas qualification, usually in Indonesia.

NCW staff occasionally engaged with other colleagues in the province through activities such as provincial heats of national English speaking competitions. However, engagement with academics outside the province was rare and most staff had been educated locally.

CV was engaged in national initiatives to improve the standard of teaching in universities. Occasionally staff were able to access scholarships to study overseas, in countries such as South Korea, Japan and Australia. Most staff had obtained qualifications in neighbouring provinces. Some informal networking between colleagues in neighbouring cities occurred.

In no institution was there any evidence of an awareness of a global community of scholars and attendance at international conferences was extremely rare.

**Theme 4: Teaching and Learning**

**Curriculum, course structure and content**

At TL there was little evidence of a coherent curriculum at the programme level. Course material was modified from whatever limited sources lecturers had access to and typically reflected the learning experiences of the teachers when they were students.

At NWC there was little evidence of the development and articulation of a curriculum. In the Foreign Languages Department, course content and learning activities were set through the adoption of a particular text, selected from nationally produced and approved publications. Administrative staff had a significant involvement in text selection. Texts for English courses were typically developed at national level under collaborative foreign (usually US) and Chinese authorship. Compulsory components of ideology and political theory were part of all undergraduate programs.

Similarly at CV, courses were designed around texts and national ideology and political theory formed part of programs. Texts were selected from a limited range of approved publications that were commercially produced by international publishing houses with some limited modification to better suit the local context, and with a much cheaper production format.

At both NWC and CV students were required to participate in military training that was integrated into the academic calendar.
Attention to global issues in content of programmes

Some evidence could be found of the inclusion of global issues in the content of programmes at each institution. At TL, the tourism management course included global environmental aspects, e.g. a component on eco-tourism. At NWC and CV, a range of global issues was explored through the teaching of English. Texts frequently had opinionated chapters on topics such as ‘life styles around the world’, ‘global connections’ and ‘environmental pollution’.

Learning and teaching resources

At TL, dated institutional equipment, mainly donated, was extremely scarce and often unusable due to lack of maintenance and frequent power outages. Basic classroom materials were almost non-existent. Paper based source material was occasionally provided to students to be photocopied at their own expense. Less than 5% of students had laptop computers. Most used non-smart phones for basic social networking. Access to the internet was slow and intermittent.

At NWC audiovisual equipment was available in just a few rooms and basic facilities were falling into disrepair. The basic teaching and learning resource was the set text, which students bought as part of a package at time of enrolment. Each class had a small student managed budget from which class photocopying was occasionally funded. Almost all students had mobile phones, approximately 30% of which were smart phones. Approximately 30% of students had laptop computers, often shared with fellow students in their dormitories. Internet access, provided free on campus, allowed students to do basic searches and limited downloading of learning materials.

The equipment situation at CV was similar to that in NWC. Class sets of texts, typically bound photocopies, were made available from the library. More than half the students had mobile phones but few were smart phones. Approximately 20% of students had laptop computers, but with internet access on campus slow and unreliable, students often used off-campus wi-fi alternatives.

Approaches to teaching and learning

Approaches to teaching and learning at TL were determined idiosyncratically according to the background and experience of individual staff. These varied considerably from a teacher-centred information transfer, typical of Indonesian trained staff, to a more interactive student-centred approach from staff trained elsewhere.

At NWC the typical approach to teaching and learning reflected the Confucian heritage of teachers and students. It was respectful, structured and usually prescriptive; it appeared teacher-centered; and included students memorizing and developing an understanding of tracts from texts.

Similarly at CV, students were exposed to limited material and encouraged to ‘learn’ set pieces. The instruction and supporting exercises were derived from the course text. There was a knowledge and understanding of concepts of student-centred learning among staff and these concepts were reflected in some class exercises. Attempts at a more flexible approach to learning were perhaps limited by an entrenched and rigid didactic approach taken during their school years.
Conclusions

The institutions above present an extreme but they are arguably no more atypical than those currently presented in discussions of higher education and globalization. While difficult to identify and count it is likely that many hundreds of similar institutions (more than the 400 or 500 ranked institutions) exist globally. The institutions have been presented to provide a stark contrast to the elite universities about which we hear so much.

The continuing dominant focus on research-intensive universities is disturbing and may come at significant cost to the majority of institutions in the sector, particularly those from countries struggling to develop their higher education sector nationally. Some of the consequences are a global devaluing of the majority of higher education institutions, a narrow focusing of resources on a small number of institutions determined to fit the ‘world’s best’ model, the creation of an unsuitable and unattainable aspirational model of a higher education institution for the vast majority of institutions, and the creation in the minds of so many students the notion that they went to an inferior institution, that even their national best is not good enough, that anything other than best in an unfair and unbalanced world competition is not good enough. There is the possibility, evident already in some national programs, of international competition in the elitist global arena drawing attention away from broader more equitable provision, and provision that is more culturally, socially and economically relevant.

The second half of the paper has attempted to indicate the limited relationship such institutions have with global concerns. These institutions are none the less important to the lives of the global citizens that are their students and the local communities that they serve. It is acknowledged that these, and similar institutions, at least appear to have less impact on global issues than their elite counterparts. However, if there is to be a broad and reasoned analysis of globalization in higher education, such institutions should be considered, along with the thousands of middle ranking (but in fact currently unranked) higher education institutions, and not just the top 5% of research-intensive universities.

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