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### Citation

Singh, Mala (2010). Higher Education Research: Global Themes and Local Settings. Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, London.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/22373/>

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# Higher education research: global themes and local settings

Mala Singh<sup>12</sup>

In the last two decades, the scope and volume of higher education research has grown enormously. But the debates about what it is and what it is for are by no means settled. Questions about its institutional settings and functions; its relationships with disciplinary interests and cross-disciplinary themes in the humanities and social sciences; the most appropriate methodologies for it; the blurry distinctions between academic and policy oriented research; the balances between theoretical and applied dimensions in the research; and questions about its take up and social impact continue to be raised<sup>13</sup>. However, the now unquestioned importance of higher education in social and economic development has brought policy-oriented research on higher education to the forefront in many higher education reform agendas. The idea that 'evidence-informed' policy will best support effective decision-making in higher education (as in other policy areas) is a useful half fiction attractive to both policy-makers and researchers. When necessary, the former are able to claim expertly and scientifically gathered 'evidence' (rather than ideology or *realpolitik*) as legitimation for policy choices and actions. The latter can presume influence over policy and politics and dream of real social impact. Despite analyses pointing to the contradictions and ambivalences in the 'research-policy-practice' nexus and the dangers of simplistic and un-nuanced understandings of it<sup>14</sup>, the generalised idea that higher education research could furnish knowledge, information, data and strategic options to inform actual policy choices continues to reverberate.

The market for 'evidence-informed' policy has now gone global since higher education is no longer the business of nation states alone, nor of a few economically well-endowed regions. Large organising concepts in the form of the 'knowledge society' or 'sustainable development' are invoked by globally influential multi-lateral bodies like the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank to draw higher education into their policy agendas. The relevant policy frameworks, research themes, data collection areas and projects of these organisations are now routinely informed by a familiar premise about the strategic role of higher education in socio-economic development, both nationally and within regions. National policies for higher education in both the developed and developing world echo this premise, although on-the-ground realities are hugely divergent in all major respects. The challenges of giving effect to the strategic role of

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<sup>12</sup> Mala Singh is Professor of International Higher Education Policy at CHERI, the Open University.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, many of the contributions in *The Institutional Basis of Higher Education Research: Experiences and Perspectives*, edited by S. Schwarz and U. Teichler, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2000. Some of these issues also surfaced in the deliberations of a panel at a recent ASHE conference in Vancouver-see the article 'The Insecurity of Higher Ed. Research' in *Inside Higher* (November 9, 2009) at <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/>.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, M. Kogan and M. Henkel, 'Future Directions for Higher Education Policy Research', in *The Institutional Basis of Higher Education Research* edited by S. Schwarz and U. Teichler, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2000; Arie Rip, 'In Praise of Speculation', *Proceedings: Social Sciences for Knowledge and Decision Making*, OECD, Paris, 2001: 95-103.

higher education in contexts of limited resources, lack of relevant information, short timeframes and complex multi-dimensional societal challenges make the idea of 'evidence-informed' policy into a seductive planning discourse, irrespective of how things work in practice. Given the arguments that policy-making is often reductively based on the "search for simple and elegant solutions" (Kogan and Henkel, 2000: 28) and that 'evidence is never tidy' (Rip, 2001), policy oriented research is more likely to be seen as 'useful' if it has clear action lines addressed to particular role-players rather than consisting of theoretically rich but practically unresolved Socratic deliberations about the complexities and unpredictability of change in higher education.

Viewed globally, there is a growing convergence of official policy discourses on the goals and functions of higher education on the one hand, and a wide variety of implementation environments and policy translations in different national and regional settings on the other. The convergence produces a set of global 'policy staples' which includes ideas about the contribution of higher education to socio-economic development and social cohesion, increasing and widening participation, and enhancing national and regional innovation capability and competitiveness. The variety of settings exposes huge differences in how policies are interpreted and applied, and what their effects are, depending on prevailing socio-political, economic and cultural factors. All of these policy assumptions and implementation experiences writ large on a global scale open up the space for much more research on higher education, especially in those regions of the world where new higher education systems are taking root or undergoing rapid expansion. More research and knowledge on higher education is necessary in order to map, make sense of and assess dominant trends and developments within higher education itself as well as its wider social impacts. However, it would be rather impoverishing for those systems and for higher education research as a field of enquiry if that research was only narrowly policy driven.

The last decade has seen a number of global and regional developments relating to policy and research on higher education:

- the OECD's 2004-2008 Thematic Review of Tertiary Education in 24 countries<sup>15</sup>;
- the Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge<sup>16</sup> established by UNESCO (2001-2009), with a special focus on increasing information about higher education and research systems in low and middle income countries;
- the World Bank's recanted position since the 1990s about the importance of higher education to the knowledge economy<sup>17</sup> and its loans to more than 100 countries for higher education reform and development;

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<sup>15</sup> See [www.oecd.org/edu/tertiary/review/synthesis](http://www.oecd.org/edu/tertiary/review/synthesis) report.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://portal.unesco.org/education/>.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, World Bank, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*, Washington DC, 2002; World Bank, *Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington DC, 2009.

- the European Commission's championing of and support for the Bologna reforms to create a European Higher Education Area, and the creation of a European Research Area to advance the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy;
- the European Science Foundation's commissioned research on Higher Education Looking Forward (HELFF 2006-8) and its follow-up research projects on Higher Education and Social Change (EUROHESC 2009-2011)<sup>18</sup>;
- The African Union's Harmonisation Strategy for higher education intended to contribute to the revitalisation of African higher education, improve quality and facilitate academic mobility and the recognition of qualifications<sup>19</sup>.

These recent examples of heightened strategic and research attention to higher education have dramatically increased expectations among diverse internal and external stakeholders of what higher education could and should be delivering. They have opened up higher education to new opportunities and non-traditional networks, and brought a multitude of daunting socio-economic tasks, often without additional resources or capacity. As indicated earlier, the new strategic frame of reference has also hugely expanded the terrain for higher education studies - for in-country as well as international comparative studies. The growing need for more studies on higher education, especially in respect of policy oriented research and evaluation studies, is not often matched by available capacity to undertake the required research, especially in the global south. This problem is often exacerbated by lack of funding to support research and research training activities. What opportunities and challenges does this situation present for new or enhanced modes of collaboration between higher education researchers in the global north and the global south? Are there, for example, enough common reference points for more comparative research to be undertaken which cuts across traditional demarcations between higher education systems in OECD and non-OECD countries? Such a step might make some policy sense in view of the increasing insertion of higher education into a global frame of reference. However, some of the differences in development priorities and associated research themes may be still too stark and may in fact divert attention from a research focus on local priorities in developing countries. Given the increasing differentiation within non-OECD countries themselves, there may, nevertheless, be possibilities in reconceptualising comparative research frames of reference from the global north to take account of, for example, the 'Rising Powers', as envisaged in the ESRC Plan for 2008-2011<sup>20</sup>.

The key concerns raised at the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in July 2009 provide a glimpse of the 'headline' issues needing to be addressed in changing higher

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<sup>18</sup> See [www.esf.org](http://www.esf.org).

<sup>19</sup> See [www.africa-union.org](http://www.africa-union.org).

<sup>20</sup> See [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk).

education systems around the globe. The Communiqué<sup>21</sup> from the Conference as well as the recommendations made to the World Conference from regional meetings in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe and the Arab world reflect the development challenges facing higher education in those regions. Issues of access, equity, quality and diversification, and trends in relation to internationalisation, regionalisation and globalisation continued to dominate the agenda for debate, research, policy and action. Building inclusive and diverse knowledge societies and facilitating sustainable development were flagged as key reference points for the international higher education agenda. The need for governments to maintain or increase investments in higher education and the importance of regulatory frameworks for quality were also emphasised as requiring attention by member states. The above issues point to a raft of associated knowledge and information needs which add up to a wide-ranging research agenda. Such an agenda could provide the theorisations, the conceptual frameworks, the data, analyses and assessments which are required to understand more clearly what is going on in higher education in different parts of the world and to support ongoing policy development, planning, implementation and monitoring of higher education.

Many of the debates at the World Conference were also accompanied by concerns that the current economic downturn would widen the gap between developed and developing countries, impacting negatively on the global development agenda. Less emphasised were the gaps in access, quality and sustainability that the crisis could widen between institutions in the same higher education system and the negative diversification that this might produce. Underpinning the deliberations in 2009, as in the case of the previous World Conference held in 1998, were the aspirations for a redefined 'social contract' between higher education and society in an era of massification, declining public funds, and social and economic development goals which are increasingly prioritising knowledge and its applications. For all the emphasis on the economic role and importance of higher education, the issues of higher education as a public good, and the public mission of higher education and its contribution to the development of citizenship skills and capabilities for democratic life were re-asserted. It will be interesting to see what the focus areas and 'performance indicators' might look like in a concrete research agenda on higher education and the public good.

The issues that were identified for attention at the World Conference as well during a number of preparatory regional meetings constitute, in many instances, familiar territory for policy-makers and researchers, having already featured on their agendas in the last decade. However, some new dynamics became clearer at the 2009 World Conference and are important to track as evolving policy and research fields. One set of issues has to do with the likely impacts of the economic crisis in re-orienting higher education policy - what are likely changes in the functions and capacities of higher education, in

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its access, equity and quality goals, and in the take-up of its products and services by its 'consumers' and 'users'. The prospects for a widening of the access and quality gaps are very real, both between developed and developing countries as well as within each cluster. Another dynamic has to do with the set up and/or rapid expansion of higher education systems, both public and private, in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa, and the developmental impact of this phenomenon on the regions and countries involved as well as beyond them. The internationalisation agenda in the developed economies will no doubt be impacted upon by an increase in higher education capacity in the developing world. The expected contribution of higher education to poverty eradication, and to the achievement of the 'Millennium Development Goals' and the 'Education for All' targets places heavy socio-economic responsibilities on higher education in addition to the challenges relating to improving access, pedagogy and quality.

The CHERI themes (Employment and the Knowledge Society, Equity and Social Justice, and Management and Regulation) as well as the issues addressed in this research report resonate with many of the priority focus areas which preoccupy policy-makers and researchers on higher education in both the developed and developing world. The almost unchallenged premise about the centrality of higher education to the knowledge society and the knowledge economy has brought increased attention to what is taught and what is learned within higher education institutions, especially in relation to graduate readiness for the world of work and relevant competencies for the labour market. Higher education, since medieval times, has been supplying trained professionals for particular labour markets (the priesthood, medicine, the legal profession). In successive waves of reform and social responsiveness, higher education has also provided engineers, teachers, social workers and other professionals, largely on its own terms or with the involvement of professional associations. The ostensible role of higher education in advancing national and regional economic competitiveness has accelerated a focus on employer and consumer perspectives in thinking about what constitutes effective education and training.

Two articles, one by John Brennan and Miriam David and the other by Lore Arthur and Brenda Little, both show how research findings point beyond the boundaries of conventional policy premises to unexpected complexities and pose new questions for further investigation. The findings highlight learning dimensions valued by students which do not feature among the categories that determine high places on rankings ladders. These ladders, as we know, have become fudged proxies for excellence and quality (presumably also of the learning experience). The dimensions valued by students include the social and personal benefits of university study alongside the acquisition of disciplinary competence and employability skills. Some of the skills valued by students may be categorised as 'soft' skills (presumably seen as 'good to have' but not as essential as specific vocational competences). Research among employers is showing that these kinds of 'soft' skills, including communication

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ability, teamwork, ability to function in different social settings, etc. are also valued in the workplace, especially as it grows more diverse, complex and non-homogenous<sup>22</sup>. What the research findings may be showing is that those who make policy for higher education on a set of narrow mechanical premises about teaching, learning and employability may be lagging behind the views of 'consumers'(students) and 'users' (employers) of higher education.

The connections between higher education and the public good and higher education and social transformation are also frequently invoked in higher education policy discourses, as in the recent World Conference on Higher Education. Very often these issues are not given as much theoretical or empirical attention in policy frameworks and research investigations as is given to the role of higher education in economic development or the importance of producing work-ready graduates. However, the potential for exploring the relationship between higher education and social transformation has increased through attention to the role of higher education institutions in regional development. An example of this can be found in the OECD Reviews of Higher Education in Regional and City Development which are underway in developed and emerging economies and which investigate the impact of higher education and its teaching, research and community engagement activities on economic, social and cultural development in those regions. The HEART project reported on by Alan Cochrane and Ruth Williams is another example of this regional focus. It combines the interest in the regional impact of higher education with a focus on the contribution that higher education institutions could make to the public good, taking into account but looking beyond the economic domain. The public good injunctions in higher education policy discourse need much more substantial content in relation to the functions and impacts of higher education. The HEART research findings are an important platform from which to draw more detailed conclusions about the role of institutions in delivering on the public good. For future research investigations, they help to set out more concretely the parameters of the public good and the possibilities and limits of social transformation in specific contexts of social and economic disadvantage.

Internationalisation is now part of the policy agendas of many national higher education systems as well as of institutions themselves<sup>23</sup>. It is also fertile ground for researchers trying to construct reasonably accurate data and analytical pictures of the growing phenomenon of internationalisation 'at home' and 'abroad' (Knight, 2008: 3). More interesting is the task of revealing what drives internationalisation and what its impacts on academic systems (beyond the financial dimensions) as well as on the individuals themselves might be. Terri Kim and William Locke focus on academic mobility in and out of the UK and begin the task of identifying a research agenda that is more qualitatively focused on changes to intellectual and scholarship

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, D.Hodges and N.Burchell, Research Report, Business Graduate Competencies: Employers' Views on Importance and Performance, Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2003, 4(2): 16-22.

<sup>23</sup> See IAU Surveys of Internationalisation among higher education institutions in 2003, 2005 and 2009. [www.iau-aiu.net](http://www.iau-aiu.net).

traditions as well as impacts on disciplinary landscapes as a result of academic mobility into the UK. The darker side of internationalisation has to do with mostly one-way academic flows into the UK and other developed economies in the form of the 'brain drain' from developing countries. An often cited grim statistic in relation to Africa, for instance, comes from the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the International Organisation for Migration - about 20,000 skilled African professionals are leaving the continent every year since 1990 (Moulton, 2009: 21) with the loss for the continent translating into a variety of gains for the developed economies in which they live and work. This was an issue flagged in the UNESCO Communiqué from the World Conference with a call to 'find common solutions to foster brain circulation and alleviate the negative impact of brain drain'.

The inclusion of higher education in the globalising policy agendas of multilateral organisations like the OECD opens up the possibility for an increasing measure of convergence in higher education policy discourses. Roger King examines the modalities through which this trend is facilitated, while interrogating the unclear alignment between ostensible global policy convergence and actual variety in national contexts. Analysts looking at higher education developments and trends in Europe have argued that, in the last decade, the impact of 'global and supra-national sources' on higher education appears to be much greater than 'national or local ones' (Usher, 2009: 97). Policy convergence under the pressurising influence of emerging global 'templates' may be an even greater challenge for new higher education systems and institutions in developing countries. This is because of the frequent lack of capacity to 'contextualise' and mediate relevant elements from powerful global 'prescriptions' for social and economic development. The potential of such templates for distracting attention from pressing local challenges is also great. The politics and practicalities of connecting meaningfully the local and the global in and through higher education becomes an even richer field of research investigation as higher education change spreads beyond high and middle income countries to the least developed economies of the world.

In conclusion, how is higher education research likely to unfold in light of a global framing of the relationship between higher education and social change *vis a vis* a proliferation of local and regional settings within which pertinent research questions have to be posed? An emerging common pool of policy themes for research investigation is already evident from recent global events like the World Conference on Higher Education. Hopefully an increase in context-informed research, especially in new and emerging systems, will add to our global knowledge base about higher education but also bring greater reflexivity and fresh perspectives to the ways in which we think about higher education and social change. Reflexivity in higher education research could come from stronger links with disciplinary and interdisciplinary bodies of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. It also requires thinking about research on higher education beyond "Policy as numbers" (Ozga and Lingard, 2007: 75-77) - the tendency to give primacy to the gathering and analysis of data in a

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narrow understanding of the 'evidence' required to inform policy decision-making.

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