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## 'Change the knowledge economy into a knowledge democracy'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 01 September 2022

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Although the prospect of a radical transformation of higher education remains dim under neo-liberalism, there is still much that could be done to help universities fulfil their public-good mandate more effectively, according to Laura Czerniewicz, former director of the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

However, university staff will need to shed their parochial attitudes towards knowledge creation, teaching and collaboration if they are to produce significant improvements within the system.

"A transformative approach to higher education would be to change the knowledge economy into a knowledge democracy, which would entail completely reorganising expenditure, resources, governance and the system of rewards," Czerniewicz says.

"At present, such a transformation has not and may be unlikely to take place, but there is still a lot that can be done."

Accordingly, Czerniewicz proposes a number of priorities for universities, which include:

- Promoting critical literacy among students as the appropriate response to a "complex and polarised" world;
- Greater collaboration within and among universities so that they can implement their social-good agenda more effectively; and
- The widespread adoption of new performance standards in place of the present international university rankings.

She further advises that universities should accelerate their efforts to address the digitalisation of education, which is an area in which they are quite vulnerable at present.

Czerniewicz proposes action on these issues in response to a neo-liberal ethos which she sees as having become increasingly influential at universities.

"I am quite disturbed by the extent of the recent and present privatisation of higher education and the way that neo-liberal practices have penetrated the language of the institutions," she says.

"Although universities should be efficient and sensible, they are not businesses and they do not report to shareholders. Rather, their mission is to promote a social good and if they are reporting to anyone, it should be the public."

The spectre of neo-liberalism is also evident in what Czerniewicz describes as "a quite parochial view of what constitutes graduate employability and how this may be achieved" which, in turn, leads to the adoption of "a narrow perspective towards knowledge creation" and "an instrumentalist, technicist approach to knowledge".

"Universities whose sole focus is employability in this sense may move to close humanities, social science and local languages departments, although such closures actually represent a false economy," she says.

**Critical thinking**

In response, she advocates the promotion of critical thinking at universities instead of a continued emphasis on the acquisition of specialist skills.

"The pressure to equip students with the hard skills required to acquire paid work in an increasingly tough casualised gig economy is great and can numb educators to the need for critical thinking," she notes. "But universities are obligated to help those lucky enough to become students who think critically."

Czerniewicz describes critical thinking as a crucial capability for addressing the present increasingly complex and polarised world.

"Although graduates need to be prepared for the world by being taught particular practical and professional skills, such skills alone are insufficient," she says.

"By contrast, an induction into critical thinking can equip students to manage the complexity facing them more effectively, asking difficult questions; recognising fake news, as well the value of new sources of information; looking past the way that everything is polarised; and interrogating authority.

"The aim should be to produce people who are both employable and employment-creating and who can make a significant contribution to society."

In an effort to foster such graduates, Czerniewicz advises, a large-scale programme to develop academics as educators should be implemented, given that many are ill-equipped to foster critical literacy, including in relation to digital skills: "There is a pressing need for massive professional development of teachers and of academics as educators."

Accordingly, she recommends that academics should be required continually to update their knowledge at particular points in their career in order to continue practising.

"Such continuous training should enable them, not only to keep pace with the latest developments in their discipline or field, but also to gain an understanding of the emerging critical literacies that they may be expected to inculcate in their students."

She stresses the importance of such educator training across disciplines and faculties. "The scholarship of teaching and learning has shown that critical literacy skills cannot be taught separately – although many academics would prefer such an approach," she says. "They have to be integrated into the curriculum."

#### Transforming governance

Turning from teaching to the issue of transforming governance, Czerniewicz advises that universities need to shift their institutional cultures, including by addressing digitalisation in education, as well as more broadly in society and the economy.

"The digital economy is here to stay despite the drawbacks and the risks of engagement that it poses at present," she says. "In other words, it is worse to be excluded from this economy, rather than to participate in it, albeit in a critical fashion."

"In this respect, it is not as if universities with barriers to access are choosing to be off the grid, like hippies just wanting to go and live in the wild."

Accordingly, Czerniewicz proposes taking a number of steps to promote greater equity of access across higher education: "The drive should be to foster inclusive systems and networks."

In this regard, she describes how the pivot to online education which accelerated under COVID-19 revealed a fundamental inequality among universities in their capacity to provide virtual teaching and learning, as well as hitherto unforeseen challenges in ensuring full access.

"It has shown that what was previously considered the absolute minimum of data that should be made widely available is way behind what is required to enable comprehensive access, such as [through the establishment of virtual classrooms] via synchronous streaming," she says.

"The challenge is not so much the provision of devices ... in fact, more people have cellphones than they have toilets. The issue is connectivity and the differing costs of data, which can vary globally by as much as 30,000:1."

In this context, Czerniewicz argues that the establishment of a basic infrastructure for connectivity should be a state responsibility, just as the supply of water and electricity is.

She also expresses concern about the issue of the datafication and digitalisation of higher education, including in relation to the administrative, procurement and legal capacities required to manage a university.

"Higher education has become a huge market for private vendors offering the new technologies and related services – all of which has created new challenges for university administrators who are negotiating new terms of engagement; signing new kinds of contracts; and procuring new kinds of tools, without necessarily having the time or capacity to grapple with the full implications of what they are undertaking."

Against this background, she notes that the blandishments of market-leading private-sector suppliers may lead university administrators to act against their institutional interests.

She cites the example of Amazon's web service, which seems to offer an easy solution to the problem of moving a university's information technology infrastructure into the cloud. "But it costs a fortune and also provides Amazon with access to all of the participating universities' metadata," she notes.

"So, there is an argument for taking the money that would be spent on this and rerouting it to other locally managed and owned service providers who have been developing a shared data infrastructure."

In a similar vein, Czerniewicz argues that universities may be able to leverage economies of scale and the power of collective bargaining through the establishment of centralised systems and a shared infrastructure.

In support of her case, she cites the benefits produced when university libraries came together to negotiate with academic publishers, as well as those generated by the Tertiary Education and Research Network of South Africa, or TENET, which provides bandwidth to South Africa's public universities.

#### A new set of performance standards

At the same time, Czerniewicz notes that increased centralisation and the power for transformation that it could unleash "would require a cultural shift at a number of universities" which may be unduly jealous of their institutional autonomy.

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There would need to be greater collaboration, not only among the universities but also within them “among academic ... and non-academic staff, who remain worlds apart”.

“Because academic and professional types of knowledge are different, these groups of staff can barely speak to each other; and there is no incentive for them to speak to each other, which does not make sense.”

Czerniewicz stresses that benefits of inter- and intra-university collaboration are not only limited to the kinds of administrative platforms that may be chosen or forged.

“A drive to promote publishing on local platforms would produce significant benefits,” she says.

At the same time, she is keenly aware of the socio-economic forces aligned against such radical change, such as, in this instance, the way in which “the system of academic rewards and promotion privileges research that has been published in privately owned Northern journals”.

Similarly, she notes the enduring capacity of the private sector to commodify campaigns originally conceived in support of the public good.

“It is ... important to ensure that your agendas are not appropriated, as the concept and practice of open-access publishing has been by big commercial publishers; or as the concept of social justice as embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, has been by many in marketing.”

Czerniewicz advises that one effective way of fostering change among higher education institutions in support of their public-service mandate would be to produce a new set of performance standards in place of the present international system of university rankings.

“[The current] rankings may be deployed to enable certain universities to fundraise but, other than that, they establish a zero-sum game, creating unhelpful competition rather than collaboration among the institutions,” she says.

“[One option] is to completely change the standards – using other measures such as assessing performance in relation to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals; collaboration; making research available through open access; and publishing locally.

“By changing the criteria and the accompanying system of rewards and incentives, a larger change may be wrought.”

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Krish Chetty for 'The Imprint of Education' project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for focus and length.*

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