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Society-centred institutions require cultural shift in HE

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 25 January 2023

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Universities must focus on equipping their students with leadership as well as technical skills and foster collaborative and experimental forms of learning and knowledge-production that can provide practical solutions to development challenges at scale, according to Arturo Condo, the president of *Universidad EARTH* (EARTH University) in Costa Rica, which focuses on the advancement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

However, transformation of the institutional culture of universities is required if they are to fulfil their role as agents of such socio-economic change, he says.

"The purpose of universities needs to be society-centred, not university-centred or professor-centred, which will require a massive cultural shift for higher education," says Condo.

At present, he notes, "higher education is not fulfilling its social role in relation to preparing leaders, which is particularly true in the Global South, although also in the United States and Europe.

"If universities only see their role as preparing engineers and doctors and biologists, they are failing society."

In this regard, he cites the mission of EARTH University, which is a private, non-profit, international institution offering a four-year undergraduate agricultural sciences qualification and which focuses on sustainable development.

"At EARTH, about half of the agricultural engineering degree programme, [for instance] is not directly concerned with agriculture, but rather with producing leaders for the tropical regions in Latin America and elsewhere," he says.

Universities and leadership

"Universities have a particular responsibility to produce leaders.

"At EARTH, about half of the agricultural engineering degree programme, [for instance] is not directly concerned with agriculture, but rather with producing leaders for the tropical regions in Latin America and elsewhere," he says.

That includes Africa, where "less than 20% of the population holds a university degree and only a minuscule minority hold a degree from an international university.

"Merely training these graduates to be, for example, software engineers, represents a massive waste of resources. They should be leaders as well."

The other key focus of EARTH University is its emphasis on collaboration, including between students and academics; with rural communities; and among higher education institutions.

Emily Kaiser, who oversees external partnerships at the institution, explains: "In its relationship with African higher education, EARTH is seeking ... to learn together with African institutions, with the goal of making agricultural education more effective.

"In its collaborations with institutions on the continent, EARTH [aims to increase the capacity of] universities to promote the development of young leaders who can lead change on the continent; support the shift toward experiential learning in which students engage as directly as possible with rural communities; and strengthen entrepreneurship as an element of agricultural curricula with the aim of producing livelihoods ... in the agricultural sector," says Kaiser.

Experimental learning

For Condo, EARTH University's own effectiveness as an agent of change stems largely from its focus on experimental, and not only experiential learning.

"EARTH is a place in which both professors and students learn, which runs counter to the dominant notion among higher education institutions around the world that learning is a one-way process, with academics teaching students," he says.

Condo emphasises that the experimental learning approach, which is "counter-cultural" to that promoted at many universities, "requires the establishment of staff recruitment, evaluation and incentive policies that can foster more engaged teaching and learning, and research".

"In other words, different qualities would be prioritised among the faculty," he says.

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In the quest to transform universities to become more society-centred and promote experimental learning, Condo contends that the most serious obstacle to change is their governance.

“Institutional autonomy and the freedom of academics to teach what they think are taken as a mantra in Latin American higher education.”

“However, the tenure system for academics can impede universities’ efforts to become more responsive and accountable to their societies and more purposeful in how they deploy their freedom to conduct research.”

In this context, Condo notes that the establishment of new systems of governance at existing universities can only be instituted by taking bold steps.

“Marginal actions are likely to be ineffective, just as a blacksmith’s hammer blows cannot shape metal unless it has already been heated to take on a new form,” he explains. “So, strong leadership from governments and, possibly, major philanthropic donors is required to foster sustainable change.”

Teamwork

For its own part, EARTH University espouses a teamwork methodology under which students from different countries work in teams for four years, including three years working on entrepreneurial projects that they have chosen.

“In order to undertake the work effectively, the students have to learn about each other [and] they have to communicate across languages and cultures,” says Yanine Chan, a dean specialising in food science entomology at the university.

“In this way, the students learn from each other’s cultural and educational differences and similarities, and teach each other, as well as the teacher-practitioners who are engaged in their projects.”

She notes that the students and staff at EARTH comprise not just a multicultural but an ‘intercultural’ group, and that indigeneity is part of that.

Condo notes that indigeneity also has relevance in relation to EARTH University’s research and development mission.

“The aim is to work with people in indigenous regions and to learn with them how food systems in these areas may be developed using ancestral as well as other knowledge,” he says.

He emphasises the critical importance of such work “given that there are pockets of knowledge which may be lost to humanity if they are not captured and systematised”.

Collaboration

Condo advocates collaboration among society-centred, engaged universities to foster structures of learning that can help to change the world for the better.

In this context, the institution is a member of the University Global Coalition which was established to foster collaboration among universities worldwide in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

“In contributing to this collaboration, EARTH University promotes the view that there is a need to harness the input of the multitude of students around the world to address the systemic challenges that need to be solved to achieve the SDGs,” he says.

As an institution focused on agricultural sciences with a mission “to alleviate poverty, promote social justice and build a future where our communities achieve sustainable and shared prosperity”, EARTH University has partnered with other institutions in Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States, to produce research in pursuit of SDG 2, which seeks to achieve “zero hunger”.

In the face of the challenge of achieving sustainable change, which “depends on recruiting a critical mass of people to the cause”, Condo notes the unintended benefits that were produced when the university went virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic.

He says that, notwithstanding the traumatic nature of the shift, the university found ways of using virtual technology as an enabler in its experiential and experimental learning processes and, as a result, has started to develop a new practice of “e-learning by doing”.

“EARTH University is now considering how it may deploy this new practice to engage thousands of young people outside the institution, including at vocational schools,” he notes.

“The idea is not necessarily to equip them with a diploma, but, rather, to foster a practice of change-making and, thus, greatly expand the pool of those who will be changing the world.”

Chan, the dean specialising in food science entomology at the university, expands on how the new form of learning may be implemented.

“There is now the possibility of connecting with high schools to offer a new form of ‘e-learning by doing’ in which the pupils interact with their environments rather than just sitting in front of a screen,” she says.

“As part of this, pupils would identify local needs and develop projects to address them in their own places.

“Unlike the traditional e-learning model, which mainly comprises reading educational materials that have been made virtually available

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and then undertaking online tests, this approach invites pupils to consider the places in which they live and learn about how they may change these in some way – with the results of this process then being shared with others via the online e-learning system.”

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professors Catherine Odora Hoppers and Crain Soudien 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. Features already published in the series can be downloaded from the HSRC's [website](#).

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