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Universities: driving inclusive development through innovation

With the economic crises, the thinking about the role of universities in industrial and other innovation processes has shifted from innovation to drive global competitiveness, to how shrinking resources can be mobilised to address growing inequality, poverty and unemployment. *Glenda Kruss* reports on a major new study underway on how universities may contribute to innovation for inclusive development.

The emphasis in debates is on how universities can support economic development and growth through industrial innovation processes, and what research, new knowledge and technology can contribute, particularly in relation to high-technology formal sectors. The questions centre on how to enhance technology transfer, establish effective incubation facilities, support patents and licensing, or other forms of profitable commercialisation of intellectual property.

But this discourse tends to obscure a more inclusive and developmental form of engagement and interaction that could contribute to innovation.

In countries that belong to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the recent economic crisis has shifted debate from innovation for global competitiveness, to consider mobilising shrinking resources to best address growing inequality, poverty and unemployment. In emerging economies, there are growing claims that science, technology and innovation-led growth can in fact result in higher levels of poverty and inequality *within* a country.

So, while in the recent past the link between innovation and growth was indivisible, recently a new debate has emerged, namely on the connection between innovation and social inclusion. Indeed, in transition and developing contexts like those in southern Africa, universities are increasingly challenged to establish a new social compact where they become key agents for inclusive social and economic development. Greater emphasis is accorded to the roles the knowledge work of university academics plays in poverty reduction and the ability of all social groups to create opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making.

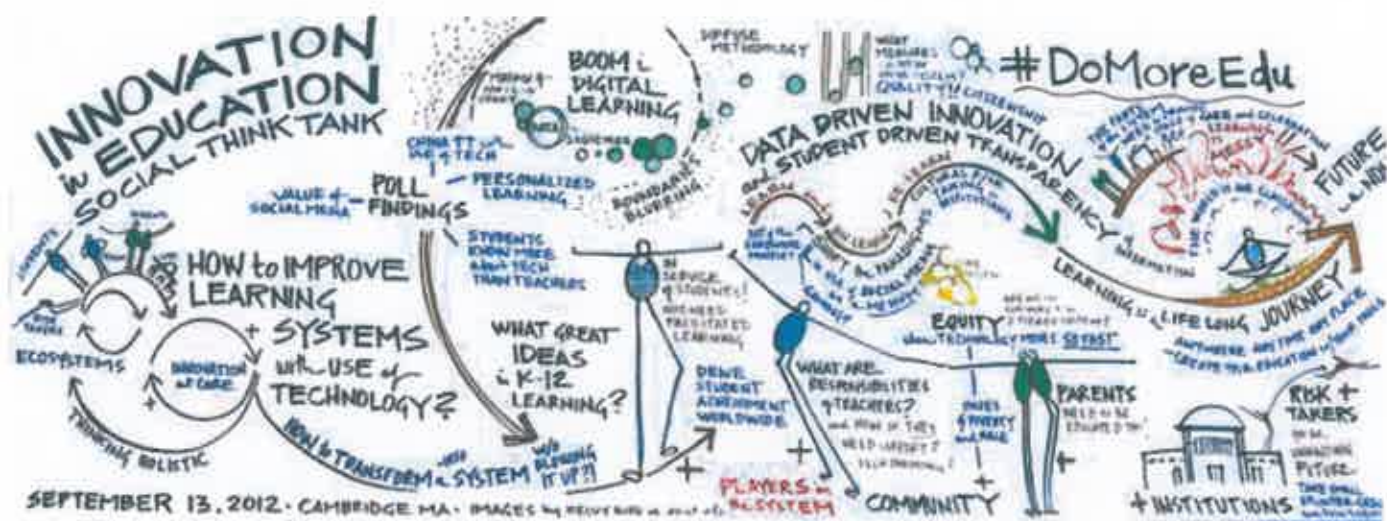
Major new study on innovation in southern Africa

Such an emphasis is driving a major new study in southern Africa, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The study seeks to address the limited attention paid to how universities contribute to innovation for inclusive development, specifically, to innovation activities that provide livelihoods to the excluded and disadvantaged.

The project seeks to build a stronger African empirical research base in collaboration among universities in four SADC countries - Botswana, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania - as well as Nigeria and Uganda. It combines networking activities with rigorous academic work and an agenda for research uptake and policy advocacy.

The project aims to make a significant conceptual and methodological contribution to research on innovation, development and higher education. It challenges the narrow focus of innovation studies - typically on science and technology - radical innovation and formal economic development, and extends the remit to encompass innovation that is incremental, takes doing, using, and interacting modes, and is integrated with social development. In turn, the tendency of development studies to focus on top-down development is challenged in favour of inclusive development that focuses on the marginalised as active agents.

In taking such an approach, the project contributes to a theoretical bridge between innovation studies and development studies that is under-explored and under-theorised.



Linking public good and social justice with innovation

Similarly, innovation studies literature is marked by a conceptual myopia towards the substantive knowledge-generation role of universities and their contribution to the public good. A corresponding myopia exists within the higher education literature, which has insufficient accounts of the role of universities in innovation, technology transfer and diffusion toward economic development. The project seeks to overcome this impasse by linking the democratic imperatives of universities in relation to the public good and social justice, with those of innovation and technology transfer.

Based on such ambitious conceptual integration, the research aims to conduct empirical research in African universities, in order to make innovation that is taking place below the radar visible; to make the nature of university-community interactions explicit; and to highlight the university as an actor in the innovation system engaging the community.

In terms of higher education governance, it addresses issues of accountability to social needs, and promoting scholarship that is more socially and economically responsive to (local) contexts.

In terms of the implications for higher education management, the issue is how to create a stronger coherence between research, teaching and community engagement. Finally, the research aims to identify what kinds of incentives will be appropriate as drivers and to address bottlenecks.

Methods and mapping

An interlocking set of research and policy oriented activities commenced in October 2012, founded on a survey methodology to map forms of university interaction with the full range of social partners in each country – whether firms, farmers, communities, government, or social organisations. Such a process will provide a picture of the main kinds of partners, the main types of relationships, channels of interaction, the outcomes and benefits of interaction and the main barriers and blockages, across distinct types of institution in each higher education system.

The analysis will draw on interviews with senior university management and academics, as well as analysis of institutional documents to understand the governance and management conditions within universities that support diverse patterns of interaction.

The mapping will provide a rich descriptive foundation of existing interactive practice within the universities in a national system of innovation; an empirically contextualised baseline for investigating specific cases of innovation for inclusive development.

We plan a set of comparative case studies in which universities and communities interact to innovate in informal settings to enhance livelihoods; for example, adaptations and diffusion of cell phone technology to inform small scale farmers' harvest and marketing practices or women market stallholders' cooperative practices; or exploiting local knowledge of local conditions in collaboration with university knowledge to establish commercially viable enterprises.

The project contributes to a theoretical bridge between innovation studies and development studies that is under-explored and under-theorised.

Comparing case studies within and across country contexts will provide an evidence base of the facilitators of and constraints on innovative and interactive practice in sectors critical to the informal livelihoods of marginalised communities. Such analysis allows for policies to be informed by insights from the local level and by the priorities of the poor.

Together, the mapping of university practice and the in-depth exploration of innovation in informal settings will allow us to interrogate critically the policy options and interventions typically proposed in the mainstream innovation systems literature. The research ultimately aims to inform better targeted policy adaptation and formulation in universities, and amongst the higher education, science and technology, and economic development communities in each country, towards inclusive development.

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