Interculturalism, Sustainable Development and Higher Education Institutions[1]

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Abstract

This paper establishes links between the fields of sustainable development and intercultural education. It is written on the premise that diverse forms of knowledge exist within different societal and national contexts, and curricula therefore need to draw on these in order to be 'non-centric'. That is, curricula should not draw more heavily from one source of knowledge while excluding or marginalising others. For instance, as this paper examines, higher education institutions in socially diverse or multicultural societies have a great deal of intellectual knowledge and expertise in education. However, the knowledge – including languages, histories, and cultures – of subordinated groups such as international students in European institutions is often entirely left out of the curriculum. In conclusion, the paper poses a number of challenges for research and teaching in higher education, especially including the need for intercultural professional education of academics so that they develop deeper intellectual understandings and competences in this area.

Keywords: intercultural competencies, higher education, sustainable development, professional development

Introduction

This paper aims to explore a range of issues related to sustainable development, academic knowledge, and interculturalism in higher education institutions. The term sustainable development is linked with a variety of dimensions, but is primarily associated with environmental concerns (Morris, 2008). This paper suggests that issues of social diversity are also highly relevant to sustainability, and provide education institutions with challenges which so far largely remain un-addressed. For instance, as Wals and Jickling (2002) argue: 'Underlying the shallow consensus that appears to be triggered by the introduction of sustainability, there are still norms, values and interests that are in conflict' (2002:224). In similar terms, this paper argues that there are many varied forms of knowledge around the world, and that these – and particularly those of subordinated or minority groups – need to be represented within higher education curricula. Approaching issues of

sustainability from an intercultural perspective such as this also runs parallel with UNESCO's aims for Education for Sustainable Development:

> This vision of education emphasizes a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to developing the knowledge and skills needed for a sustainable future as well as changes in values, behaviour, and lifestyles. (UNESCO, 2003)

At the national level, one means of promoting such a holistic approach to education would be to take into account the different forms of knowledge that are represented by diverse languages, histories, and cultures in a society. As will be argued in the next section, promoting this approach internationally would demand a more intercultural perspective. Given that many different forms of knowledge do exist, both nationally as well as internationally, the paper further argues that curricula within higher education institutions needs to be non-centric. In other words, curricula should not draw heavily from one source of knowledge while excluding or marginalising others. Higher education institutions in particular often have a great deal of intellectual knowledge and expertise, and so are in a position to make a significant contribution to both intercultural education and sustainable development. However, the connections between sustainable development and diversity are rapidly changing and necessitate a sustained social science analysis (Adomssent *et al,* 2007). The paper therefore considers the conceptual links between interculturalism and sustainable development, and discusses the implications for research and teaching in higher education.

Interculturalism and Sustainable Development in Education

A range of international initiatives have relevance for the role of higher education in both the promotion of sustainable development and the protection of cultural diversity. Various declarations at the international level, for example, have contributed to discussion of issues of sustainable development in higher education, including the Talloires Declaration (ULSF, 1990) and the Thessaloniki Declaration (MIO-ECSDE, 1997). These and other declarations promote the idea that sustainability is relevant to all disciplines and identify the need for the 'greening' of organisational working processes. On the other hand, UNESCO has been actively engaged in work related to the protection of cultural diversity, including through the creation of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and the more recent Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005). However, the work of these multiple international agencies is not joined up, and the various initiatives concerning sustainable development and cultural diversity remain disconnected and disparate.

The role of education within these legislative frameworks is also complex. Specifically, education is commonly seen as a route not only to enhance strategies to deal with catastrophes, but also to develop pro-active initiatives which enhance the knowledge, skills and competences which learners, activists and others need to work towards developing viable and sustainable futures.

This paper suggests, however, that many of the substantive challenges of sustainable development are frequently perceived to relate only to the southern hemisphere, and that institutions in the northern hemisphere tend to provide leadership rather than partnership to address them. This is despite evidence of highly unsustainable development in both the global North and South, in rural and urban areas, and in modern and traditional contexts, and also that large parts of many so-called 'developed' nations remain 'under-developed'. It therefore seems important that issues of sustainable development are not merely articulated as a distinction or division between the global North and South, but from a differently re-imagined intercultural perspective. This requires that oppressed peoples in different parts of the world are not constructed as being frozen in time and place, and with a fixed status, but as vibrant and dynamic cultures, especially in their struggles to survive on the margins of economic globalisation.

Such an intercultural perspective would necessitate an understanding of the legacies of resistance of oppressed peoples, their cultures and civilisations. In this respect it important to consider Edward Said's notion that 'the production of knowledge best serves communal as opposed to sectarian ends; how knowledge that is non-coercive can be produced in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions and strategies of power' (Said, 1978). This perspective necessitates in the first instance the unlearning of what Raymond William describes as the 'inherent dominative mode' (William, 1958:376).

It is clear that educational institutions have a critical role to play in international relationships through maintaining critical and academic distance and opening up scientific spaces to generate and disseminate knowledge. Globalisation has contributed to the creation of networks of knowledge which span the whole globe and can enable educational institutions to participate in building a democratic and equitable world. However, agreements which seek to include higher education as one of a range of 'trades and services' included within the General Agreement on Trade and Services drafted by the World Trade Organisation also present danger in the form of the increased 'commodification of knowledge' based on market principles. This treatment of knowledge is inimical to idea of using knowledge for the common good.

In terms of promoting action to enhance sustainable development between the industrialised, developing and emerging economies, however, these international agreements can also be used to close the rising knowledge gaps, and to reduce brain drain as well as social tensions through migration. The reduction of the brain drain from research and teaching institutions in the southern hemisphere is particularly important because it has diminished the capacity of those institutions to contribute to new knowledge in the fields of sustainable development, intercultural understanding and conflict resolution.

Higher education at national levels, within the European Union and the Council of Europe, and among institutions in the southern hemisphere needs to adopt a strategic approach to issues of intercultural education and sustainable development. Such an approach would ensure that the whole of the education sector would autonomously take a lead in the critical analysis of issues and the focus on the policies necessary in helping to implement positive measures in these fields.

Curricular Issues

The central argument of this paper is that within socially diverse or multicultural communities, in order to obviate intercultural conflicts and to enhance intercultural understandings across cultural and civilisation divisions, there is a need for the development of a non-centric curriculum. In this regard, divided and divisive notions of curricula centred on European, Asian, African or Islamic identities are inimical to developing intercultural understandings. Education institutions in Europe and other regions of the world need to instead consider inclusive and non-centric knowledge to be valid at the level of the community, locally, regionally and universally.

In the European context, non-centric curricula at the school and higher education level are essential to ensure that students also have non-Eurocentric knowledge and skills. Research done by Samir Amin (1989) and Martin Bernal (1987, 1991), for instance, has made important historiographic analyses of the reconstruction of European history in the 18th and 19th centuries. These have shown that with the rise of racism and of anti-Semitism, the learning and understanding that the ancient Greeks acquired from the Egyptians (perceived to be Africans) and Phoenicians (seen as forebears of the Jewish faith) was excluded from the canon of history. Learning inherited from Greek civilisation thus became reconstructed as 'pure' European, with no links to other civilisations or their knowledge systems. This reconstruction of history is of critical importance because it highlights the subjectivities of knowledge which learners bring to teaching and learning contexts. Academic engagements which involve the 'love of learning and learning for the sake of learning', on the other hand, can provide a firm foundation for citizens' democratic engagement within modern polities.

Largely, however, the above is not the case. Education systems commonly exclude the linguistic and knowledge systems of groups which are considered to be less or un-civilised (Gundara, 2000:183-199). Apart from the languages, histories and knowledge of subordinated European nationalities, this construction also excludes the languages and knowledge of other groups who are present in Europe, such as the Roma peoples. One problem in the implementation of intercultural education is that the languages, histories and cultures of these subordinated groups are not seen as having equal value to those of dominant European nationalities. An entitlement

to an intercultural curriculum is perhaps one of the greatest challenges to bringing about the development of intercultural education.

The development of a non-centric curriculum in all education institutions therefore requires academics and teachers to work closely with historians, social scientists and other researchers in their respective fields. Sheila Aikman's (1997) work on inter-cultural bilingual education, for instance, has been undertaken in many parts of the world and has explored fourth world peoples' languages and knowledges about sustainability. Nevertheless, the mainstream educational discourses continue to ignore languages and knowledges from the depths of the Amazonian, Aboriginal, African and Asians forests and nomadic peoples.

The key issue worth exploring here is how to develop relevant curriculum from the local to the global levels which encompass shared aspects of knowledge and which can enable the development of non-federal values and democratic engagements.

Students and Academic Work

Drawing attention to some of the issues concerning higher education specifically, two examples are taken in this section: international students and female students. Both groups, it is argued, largely have their forms of knowledge ignored by the institutions in which they study. This is despite the fact that women as well as 'foreign students' may not necessarily be a societal minority, because they may constitute a majority where they come from and also have a very different under-standing of issues of identity.

International Students

One issue in many polities is that different communities have varying levels of access to school and higher education. In Britain, for instance, there has recently been an increase in chiefly middle-class, African and Asian minority students. An estimated 60 per cent of these students are studying at the new (post-1992) univer-sities, and many of them do very well. However, according to work by the UK's Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), the representation of Afro-Caribbean men and of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in higher education remains low (HEFCE, 1996). There is also evidence of low representation of young people from white, working class communities. These divides do not bode well for sustainable futures, and have the potential to increase intercultural community conflicts.

Institutional customs, practices and procedures, may overtly and covertly dis-criminate against students from certain social classes or racially and culturally different backgrounds. At this level, formal policies are needed to ensure that institutional arrangements and practices do not discriminate against groups defined as being 'different'. Monitoring such policies ought to ensure that student admissions, staff appointments and promotions are transparent. This is essential both for the optimum functioning of higher education institutions and in ensuring

quality control in relation to equity in school, professional and higher education. Importantly, however, what should be monitored is the effectiveness or otherwise of policies of equality, and not the 'ethnicity' of groups.

Of course, one of the very positive aspects of having a diverse student body in higher education is that students can contribute new and different ways of thinking, behaving and interacting with each other and their tutors. In certain Asian and African cultures, for example, an appropriate behaviour towards those who are learned and academic is to demonstrate respect and to maintain what is seen as a proper distance (Jones, 2010). However, the hierarchical character of academic institutions in some cultures can also prevent some international students from treating members of faculty informally or from challenging statements made by academic staff, even if that is the norm both in Britain and other European countries.

Female Students

Female students have historically played key roles in intercultural education and sustainable development, and need to be further enabled and empowered to continue to contribute to both areas in the future. The involvement of women from minority communities can present a rather different set of potentials and problems, however. Such students may be even more motivated than some men from their communities, as well as more disciplined and committed. Their focus and concentration may partly arise from their involvement with carrying out chores in their personal capacities at home. In certain cases, they may, however, have a lower order of academic skills and knowledge than their male counterparts as a result of the educational inadequacies of the learning institutions they attended previously (Jones, 2010).

Ideally, institutions taking on female students from diverse backgrounds should create an inclusive intellectual and academic structure to enable them to make intellectual contributions at tutorials, lectures and seminars. One particular challenge for female students from patriarchal societies may be that male dominance in general, but also from men within their communities, needs to be addressed both before entry and within institutions during seminar and classroom interactions. Female students can then, in turn, help to ensure a supportive context in which other students from similar backgrounds can make positive intellectual contributions.

Institutional Policies and Orientation Programmes

Where some of the academic and support staff of an institution are from non-majority backgrounds themselves, this may help to provide the contexts which enable students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to more easily adjust to an academic milieu. An intellectually and materially supportive environment is a

prerequisite to establishing collegiality. However, to enhance both academic understanding of, and policy oriented studies for sustainable development within higher education, institutions in the northern and southern hemispheres also require long-term strategies and effective structures for addressing issues of interculturalism.

Strong institutional policies and sanctions should be in place to regulate the behaviour of all staff and students, whether in dealing with racism or sexism, in order to ensure that no student feels excluded or victimised. Named equal opportunity consultants in academic contexts, for instance, can prove highly supportive of tutors and students. These policies need to be devised and implemented in a systematic manner to ensure that they are not simply seen as attempts to be 'politically correct'. A preliminary orientation programme can help to ensure, for example, that male students from patriarchal communities can work positively with female tutors or fellow students. In the absence of such a collective ethos, both students and tutors are likely to confront awkward situations and misunderstandings. It is therefore important to work to ensure that exclusivist behaviours of any kind are not accepted within higher education institutions.

Such institutional policies are far more important than the recommendations of writers such as Phillips and Pugh (1994), who suggest that minority students should learn 'assertion techniques' to cope with exclusion or victimisation. This approach leaves the onus for institutional change on the students when, in fact, it is the institutions themselves which are responsible for promoting change and facilitating positive understandings of diversity among staff and students. The central task of higher education institutions is not to encourage 'assertiveness' among particular groups, but to promote conversation and dialogue so that students have open minds. These conversations ought to cut across academic, disciplinary, group, social class or nationality divisions and to encourage a critical approach to received wisdom and stereotyped identities.

Of course, students from different backgrounds have different strengths and weaknesses, and academic departments and tutors may need to acquire resources and expertise to deal with the complex levels of understanding and skills – as well as the lack of them – that diverse students bring to institutions. Tutors, in particular, require greater 'resources and capabilities so that the student, once accepted, does not fail for want of adequate tutorial support' (Eggleston and Delamont, 1983:62-63). Teaching and supervisory functions should enable each individual student from a disparate background to shift from being a relatively 'ill-informed and undisciplined thinker to the author of a limited but definitive enquiry' (Eggleston and Delamont, 1983:62-63).

In an even broader sense, the relationships between institutions and communities have particular significance for students from diverse backgrounds. In other words, if institutions have good relationships with the communities in which they are

located, then students from minority backgrounds are likely to feel safer and freer to study and develop. If not, then they can be particularly vulnerable to exclusion and racism.

Intercultural Education for Professionals

Higher education institutions perform an enormous service to society not only by providing opportunities for academic study, but also by providing professional training. Many of these professionals – and particularly those working in areas related to public and social policy – may in turn be responsible for ensuring good governance, delivering equality, providing good public services, and developing mechanisms for sustainable development in their societies. The key questions to be asked are, therefore: What is the status of academic work on issues of sustainable development and intercultural studies? What types of intellectual and institutional measures need to be implemented to raise the profile of these fields within higher education?

Firstly, in order to develop the best educated and optimally qualified public and social policy professionals, their professional education should be undertaken at universities or institutions with comparable standards to those of high status professions such as, for example, law, medicine, and architecture. Furthermore, by joining an accredited professional education programme after completing an undergraduate degree, public and social policy personnel could potentially achieve a professional status and autonomy similar to those in other highly-regarded professions. As a part of this accreditation process, intercultural dimensions need to be formally built into courses.

An accredited professional competence, which is validated and includes an integral intercultural dimension, is needed to ensure that what is at heart an essential academic issue is not marginalised. Nor should intercultural education be seen as an issue relevant only to culturally diverse urban institutions, but one that is important to all institutions, including suburban and rural ones. Likewise, issues of sustainable development ought not to be perceived as only being relevant to the southern hemisphere and therefore marginalised within higher education systems in the northern hemisphere.

Furthermore, at present many students from minority backgrounds who do well at university tend to choose high status professions, rather then what are considered to be 'lower level' social policy professions. Yet, to make intercultural education and sustainable development more effective and part of the mainstream work of higher education, academic institutions need to have representation from diverse students and teachers at all professional levels. Approaches to education for minority students therefore also need to be improved, and measures instituted to ensure that a number of them will ultimately work on intercultural issues or related areas.

Quality and Structure of Intercultural Professional Education

The issues for professional education in general, and for its intercultural dimensions, are twofold: What do professionals need to know in terms of knowledge? What kinds of key skills do they need? Regardless of the specific answers to these complex questions for particular areas of work, we argue that the central role of educational institutions should be to ensure that professionals' understandings and skills are of a high order. The status and structure of the public and social policy professional institutions are therefore critical for the role and position of professional education itself. For example, if professional educators are seen largely as former practitioners (for example, development educators, environmental workers, teachers, etc.) whose understanding of the field and academic knowledge of public and sustainability policy issues and research may itself be quite limited, then the education they provide is unlikely to be perceived as adequately rigorous. There is, therefore, a need to enhance the expertise of those who educate professionals, giving them a sound and rigorous academic background and an ability to work together with others to develop sound sustainable development and intercultural dimensions within programmes.

Professionals education at the postgraduate level also needs to provide both systematic academic study as well as opportunities for closely supervised and monitored 'field' experience. Higher education institutions should therefore work to establish good links with other local institutions, for example, in the way that many medical schools are linked with hospitals. This would help to create possibilities for the cross-fertilisation of ideas across knowledge systems and their practice, and would benefit and enhance both sustainable development and the implementation of intercultural education.

One of the key critiques of intercultural education is that it 'waters down' the educational process and does not help to raise educational standards. While such critiques need to be seriously considered, they should also be tempered by recognition that these fields are based on a sound intellectual basis. As such, the focus on good intercultural education should be seen to raise the level of quality and of equality of education. For instance, equality of opportunity needs to lead to greater levels of equalities in educational outcomes. Hence quality and equality go hand in hand – a conclusion that is based on rigorous research, analysis and the effective implementation of work in the field. Similar critiques might also be directed towards issues of sustainable development, and will need to be similarly addressed by evidence from research and practice.

However, if such efforts are left to the initiative of a few academic members of staff who are interested in these fields, and no structural arrangements are made to allow for a more integrated approach, they are likely to continue to be marginalised. Each field has to acquire and develop its own expertise, and also work to of interdisciplinary and cross-institutional frameworks to implement change. These large-

scale efforts therefore require the involvement not only of a few enthusiasts, but also of structural measures – resources, mechanisms and infrastructure – to ensure that any changes will be institutionalised. Such changes are necessary because all institutions have their own customs, procedures and practices, many of which can, directly or indirectly, discriminate. However, such discriminatory practices may not be evident at the surface level. They can only be eliminated if institutional structures bring about greater openness in their operations.

Policies for intercultural academic or professional education also cannot be effective unless they have the support of all staff, and changes are seen to be made in (a) student admissions, (b) staff recruitment, development and promotions, and (c) initiation of research and curriculum developments. Moreover, as has been stated before, such changes require an evaluation of their effectiveness, and cannot simply be tokenistic. Academic and professional educators will need support through staff development to update their knowledge and skills in these areas. Higher education institutions ought therefore to ensure that the intellectual and professional development of academics and staff includes intercultural competencies as well as in the area of their professional expertise. This entails a complex evaluation of values, standards and methods across a range of their activities (Gundara, 1997). It should be acknowledged therefore that professional education has conceptual, theoretical and practical dimensions, and it is likely that there will be tensions about the appropriate balance between these conflicting demands.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed a wide range of issues that need to be considered in engaging with sustainable development through an intercultural perspective. It has outlined the need for inclusive and non-centric knowledges to be included in sustainable development thinking and efforts, and also particularly emphasised the role that higher education institutions must play in this endeavour. For instance, curricula need to be genuinely inter- and multi-disciplinary, to include the languages and histories of subordinate groups, and to represent the knowledge of women (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) and of international students who are studying across cultures. The paper has explored a range of issues that need our urgent attention, including working with student diversity to build inclusion within higher education institutions.

In summarising the relevance of linking intercultural education with sustainable development, the paper has highlighted the need for the intercultural education of professionals, for interdisciplinary work, and for cross-institutional frameworks to implement these changes. One of the foremost challenges for developing teaching programmes of these kinds is that educators in the first instance need to acquire intercultural understandings themselves, so that they can then share them. These competences in turn need to be related to the inter- and multi-disciplinary teaching

of education for sustainable development, and more broadly to the complex secular and religious ethical issues which are found in diverse societies and polities (cf. Kung, 1990). This research and developmental work would enable lecturers to teach these subjects with a high degree of academic rigour and professionalism. Hence, integrative research and learning cultures are of paramount importance in furthering educational work in intercultural education.

To conclude, the higher education sector has an important role to play in creating greater levels of equality through the improvement of educational outcomes for all. In diverse societies, understandings of the relationships between social and natural environments need to be intellectually harnessed at both local and global levels in order to effectively tackle issues of justice in both social and natural environments.

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Note
1 An earlier version of some of the arguments in this paper was published in Gundara (2006).

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