

EDITORIAL

The international in higher education: dichotomies and diversity

In the last 10 years higher education has become increasingly globalised, resulting in changing bodies of students in many higher education institutions, increased mobility of some staff, the utilisation of information and communication technologies in learning and teaching in new ways, and the expansion of inquiry into new areas. Key features of globalisation, particularly the disjunction between the effects of economic globalisation and social development, have widened the gap between the richest and poorest countries and peoples of the world. All these processes present particular challenges for the higher education curriculum and the organisation of learning and teaching

This special edition of *London Review of Education* publishes a collection of papers on these themes initially presented in July 2007 at a conference held at the Institute of Education, University of London. The conference *Learning Together – Reshaping Higher Education in a Global Age* assembled a unique combination of policy-makers, students, academic and administrative staff to discuss research and practice relating to the growth of international concerns in higher education and the possibility of taking up issues of equality, justice and sustainability in curriculum, pedagogy and policy.¹

Conference presentations, like many of the papers in this issue, clearly evoked the dichotomies between the speed and growth of higher education in some parts of the world and the lack of provision in others. It also illuminated disjunctures between different groups within universities regarding what the form of their engagement with the international was or could be. For some, meanings ascribed to ‘the international’ entailed increasing market share or expanding national competitiveness, while for others this involved developing capacities to understand complex relationships that might not yield high returns in monetary terms. In this issue the papers by Takagi, Peterson and Oketch all deal with aspects of this polarisation.

These dichotomies in how the international in higher education can be understood intermesh with a simultaneous debate regarding how diversity can be accommodated in higher education. Do different epistemologies call into question particular certainties associated with higher education, or are these claims spurious? What research orientation, pedagogies or approaches to affirmative action support increasingly diverse student bodies and staff working across disciplines? The papers by Horstemke, Unterhalter, Onsongo and Hegarty take different perspectives on this, but all agree that the international in higher education is complex, requiring particularly careful forms of assessment in making judgements regarding policy and practice.

The summer of 2007 when the *Learning Together* conference took place may well have been one of the last moments for some years at which the economic growth, so long associated with globalisation and the expansion of higher education, could be discussed without demur. In editing the revised versions of these papers one year later, when so much has changed regarding the global economic landscape, with a number of major economies recording sharp declines in employment and growth, and with food shortages, and the effects of climate change sharpening perceptions of worldwide inequalities, we have had to ask ourselves whether the ‘global age’ in higher education authors addressed still exists. Our assessment is that it does, but in a different

form. The technological base of the 'global age' in ICT might have been implicated in the grave financial crises, but it will not be extinguished by it. The forms of global financial interconnection might have exacerbated the collapse of some banks and multinational corporations, but the political responses to these events have generally not entailed a rejection of global collaborations. Sharp divisions continue to mark the experience of the financial crisis, graphically captured in the imagery from the US that pits events and aspirations on Wall Street and the views of finance capital against Main Street, seen to be the centre of everyday economic and social concerns. Generally absent from this characterisation are the views of the very poorest on the Main Streets far away from capital cities or powerful countries. At the time of writing we do not know what the effects of these dichotomies will be on University Street. It may be that just as certain large financial institutions have come out as winners from the banking crisis, some leading universities might gain even greater stature, while others suffer extreme hardship and contract. On the other hand, it might be that the revival of Keynesian economics predicted in the US and elsewhere enormously expands and transforms the education sector and that higher education gets an unexpected opportunity to take a new bearing on a global age, where some versions of the local come to be radically repositioned. We are certain, however, whatever direction higher education takes, global inequalities will not be redressed automatically. In our view learning together will only be considered with serious attention when issues of diversity are addressed as central, not peripheral, in arguments about how resources are to be distributed, pedagogies to be evolved and idea of the international in higher education to be developed.

Note

1. For a full report of the conference see <http://ioewebsserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=14744>.

Elaine Unterhalter and Moses Oketch
Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK