

Innovation, Inclusion & Development: Introductory Session

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Rethinking Universities for Development: Intermediaries Innovation & Inclusion

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CCO Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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S K Sopory, Vice Chancellor, JNU (Inaugural Address)

Why rethink the role of universities? All Universities, including those like Harvard are “rethinking” their role in this changing day and age. It is perhaps true that the “half-life” of any university is about 30-40 years, which is about the time it takes to stabilize itself after which it starts deteriorating in terms of both research and teaching.

With the Universities for Research and Innovation Bill being introduced in 2012, there is much debate on what constitutes innovation and what the role of the university in innovation is. The passage of such bills seems to suggest that existing universities have not innovated and do not need to innovate any longer. Boundaries are being enforced on the nature of innovation and these boundaries are being dictated by a purely economic outlook on what innovation or development constitutes. Innovation can emerge only from an uncaged mind free from restrictive agencies and directives. Research should indeed be guided, but there should not be restrictions on what one should or should not discover.

Inclusion is as important. JNU was among the first universities in India to implement affirmative policies on its own. As a result the university admits people from all cultures, gender and backgrounds and provides an enabling environment to them. Many are of the wrong opinion that social inclusion is detrimental to innovation, but universities like JNU have proven otherwise.

It is the duty of research networks like UNIID to identify the shortcomings of the university and thereby suggest guidelines on how they can reflect and act on implementing inclusive innovation and development. In spite of all the obstacles like incoherent recruitment policies, autonomy, dilution of standards in teaching and research processes, red-tapism and regulatory procedures, we should collaborate and take forward suggestions to set our house in order to become more innovative and responsible to society at large.

Dhruv Raina, JNU

At the UNIID workshop in Colombo, two different views emerged. One that the university was perhaps an outdated structure, and there was need to work outside the university or draw the university towards the experiments that went on outside the university within the format of what has been called mode-2. The second view was that the university, if permitted was still a place where interesting experiments could be pursued, and that it was not an organisationally and intellectually moribund site for the production of knowledge. This gathering is testimony to the marginal view outside academe that while much is wrong with the university and its related structures today, there is still latitude for experimentation and innovation – or imagination and play.

Thinking about UIID, and drawing inspiration from a classic paper by A.K.Ramanujan, one wonders which of the four terms in UNIID must be problematized – the university, innovation, inclusion or development. To which somebody could say, it is the relationship between these four terms. To which Ramanujam would have responded that the question would vary with the emphasis accorded to each of the four terms.

Is the university in a crisis? Has the university which for 200 odd years been the site for the production of robust knowledge been marginalized in the knowledge production game? Is it no longer considered an innovative place? If we seek to invent a new institutional space, the questions -- innovation for what and for whom which refer to the two other terms inclusion and development get problematised.

At Colombo we were concerned with the sort of curricula we could envision for an inclusive society of the future. The epistemology group asked what sort of curriculum would be able to respond to a variety of economic (global) social and cultural tasks and what sort of reform would this entail. Would it mean reconfiguring the disciplinary maps of the 19th century university and re-envisioning our schools and faculties? Would it also call for the destabilisation of the organizational hierarchies within the university and its entire family of affiliated institutions -- from the technical institutes and the vocational colleges, to the institutions dedicated to the tasks of continuing education?

What sort of innovation are we speaking of and why does the term evoke images of the market and marketability? Is this itself a part of managerial norms that are being introduced into the system of credentialisation of the university? Why have we as social scientists forgotten to comprehend where this term comes from and what sorts of agendas does it disguise and how like science, innovation too has come to acquire a culturally and value neutral connotation? Or perhaps we have been so complicit in the realization and celebration of the knowledge economy that we have for the time being side-stepped the critical function of the social sciences.

The third term we need to ask ourselves is inclusion and its complex conjugate, exclusion. Can it suggest something beyond affirmative action? Does it also suggest that besides including the discriminated and marginalized -- the suppressed and subaltern voices, it is imperative to envision new ways of knowing, of integrating new knowledge forms into our conceptual and inter or trans-disciplinary maps. Does the discourse of inclusive innovation attempt to commoditise these different ways of knowing by suggesting that the quantum and quality of innovation would be enhanced by bringing in a diversity of perspectives and knowledge forms? What problems of translation, philosophy of science, and deeply ethical concerns are implicated in this way of thinking? One can recognize the crossing here of different agendas: How does one employ the term inclusion innovatively without compromising the central concerns of social justice and equity; and on the other hand to critically ask ourselves what does it mean for innovation to be inclusive?

And finally the term development. We have a critique of development. But the term that was deeply problematic in social science discourse in the 1970s and 1980s came back within the sustainable development discourse in the 1990s, was subsequently pluralized within the social theories of multiple modernities or development discourse.

Each of us here have come to our subjects of investigation from different sets of concerns and disciplinary predispositions -- but each one of us sets off by a recognition of a conceptual or relational, organisational or institutional crisis and it is the responses we set to chronicle, describe or engage with. In doing so we would need to reflect on how we could keep this network going, and one way of doing so is also to widen and deepen the canvas of our research agendas. I hope this would be the beginning of an innovative/fruitful/imaginative/meaningful conversation.

Shambu Prasad, XIMB

How can we re-envision Science & Technology in the 21st century on three principles of Plurality, Sustainability and Justice? This is the context in which some academics and practitioners have brought out a manifesto “*Knowledge Swara*”. Internationally too, a certain kind of re-thinking on the issue of science and society was taking place and the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex had brought out its own “A New Manifesto”. Some of us have worked on innovation, mainly to move away from a narrowly defined economic understanding of innovation to a broader social science understanding of innovation. We wanted to move away from the predominant innovation systems idea and look at the role of civil society in bringing to the fore knowledge which many people at the grassroots have used while shaping their idea of development. In this project, we wanted to take it further to see how Universities can be involved in such innovation and take it forward. There was the notion of the developmental University floating around particularly in Latin America, that Universities have a role beyond research and teaching, to development of the region in which they exist. Can we work on this idea in the Indian Context?

Phet Sayo & Ambika Sharma, IDRC

The discourses on themes around innovation, namely development, knowledge society, knowledge economy are in crisis. I am in a programme in IDRC called Information and Networks. We focus around issues around how society is changing vis-a-vis the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly network technologies – mobile phones, internet and how that is changing sectors including the university. We seem to be pushing ideologies and agendas with these technologies without even questioning the issues of inclusion/exclusion, or what development we are actually promoting.

Work on Granting Councils

IDRC's current work in South Asia is focused on looking at opportunities in and with research granting councils around the world. As part of this, IDRC took up a four year scoping study looking at efficiency of operations and collaboration of research councils in Latin America, Africa and South East Asia. In South Asia, this scoping study and discussions within and outside IDRC led to two themes for future work. The first component is to explore the changing landscape in funding and financial mechanisms at research granting councils, and to examine the rise of civil society in South Asia (primarily India) in this emerging context. The second component is to look at the emerging open science movement, for instance, the role of the university in citizen science, open access, etc. and how this can lead to collaborative research and impact such as the work done by the Open Source Drug Discovery (OSDD) movement in India. These two themes emerged out of the realization that there is inadequate support for social science research in the developing world. Within these two themes there are secondary questions on where is the global funding for research councils in South Asia going and why? What is the industry-academic interface in this? It seems that private universities are moving more into agriculture, bio-technology, information technology and pharmaceuticals and how are private universities placed in this? Which disciplines are receiving the most funding and why?

IDRC will also promote opportunities for promoting collaborative research and explore if and how universities and government systems can work together in research. The idea is to leverage existing research granting councils to convene and collaborate in research activities and not die a slow death like the council in Bangladesh.