



Towards higher education for a better civil society

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Higher education around the world is at a juncture. For instance, academics are now challenged to protect **academic freedom**, to treat **lifelong learning** as a human right and to reinvent the institutional vision, mission and values so they are compatible with the realities of the emerging world paradigms of globalisation, social responsibility and sustainable development.

To this end, educators must first understand what it means to be a socially responsible institution and their **role in civil society**.

Civil society can be defined as the third sector of society. Whereas the first and second sectors of society include government (that is, the public sector) and business institutions (that is, the private sector), civil society (that is, the civic or community sector) includes all other individuals, groups and institutions (for example, citizens, families, educational, religious, non-profit and non-governmental organisations) that operate, by and large, independently of the government and business sectors.

As such, the main role of civil society is to represent the core interests of the citizenry. In a representative democratic society, civil society is critically important to the proper functioning of society since it helps create a more informed, engaged and well-functioning citizenry.

Civil society **builds social and cultural capital** and thus serves as the glue that not only helps to hold society together but also helps to develop society in ways that government and business cannot.

The rise and role of civil society

In recent decades, civil society has taken on an increasingly large role in society due mainly to globalisation and the ongoing development of democracy and human rights.

Not only does civil society help to build needed social and cultural capital but it complements the other sectors and, some would argue, it also serves as a check-and-balance on the other sectors, which is important for the proper functioning of a democratic society.

Today, there are a large number of civil society organisations to represent the diverse needs and interests of society. The more diverse, fragmented and pluralistic the society at large, the more likely there will be an equally diverse, fragmented and pluralistic civil society.

Within a globalised context, the reach and impact of civil society extends well beyond conventional political, economic, social, technological and environmental boundaries.

It is not surprising that the role, scope and impact of civil society has increased dramatically in recent years. This is especially true for issues that transcend national boundaries and for issues that are so complex and so large in scope that they are not confined to one sector, such as environmental issues (for example, **climate change**), immigration issues (for example, the **refugee crisis**) and justice issues (for example, **human rights**).

Thus, intergovernmental organisations, such as the **United Nations** and **World Bank**, and non-governmental organisations, such as the **International Association of Universities** and the **International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association**, help to bridge the gaps between sectors by addressing important issues that may be beyond the remit or capability of stand-alone and siloed institutions. Civil society organisations can therefore be considered supra-institutional organisations.

Socially responsive knowledge and skills

By definition, higher education institutions are **catalysts for political, economic, social, technological and environmental change** since their main mission is to consume and produce knowledge and skills. In doing so, they serve as the engines for political development, economic growth and social transformation, among other things.

As such and within the context of social responsibility and globalisation, higher education should move beyond merely involving students in community service and responsible citizenship initiatives (albeit very important initiatives), which are often implemented as one-off programmes or extra/co-curricular activities.

As programmes like writing across the curriculum and undergraduate research have demonstrated, to fully embed a new initiative into the curriculum requires substantial institution-wide commitment, research and resources from the institution and from faculty.

Therefore, institutional leaders and faculty – as instructional leaders – must take the lead in integrating social responsibility and sustainable development issues into and across the curriculum.

Moving beyond civic literacy and civil education

Since universities are the main drivers of the growing global knowledge society, it follows that universities must take the lead in transforming that knowledge society for a better world.

Chief among concerns is transforming the curriculum to make it relevant to the issues of the emerging world. As such, the academic community must recognise the role it plays in civil society and act accordingly.

For instance, transforming the curriculum means fully integrating social responsibility and sustainable development into all aspects of the curriculum. This can be achieved in a

number of ways depending on the political and cultural context, the institutional mission, the academic discipline and other factors.

As such, curriculum reform will naturally involve integrating human rights education, peace education, **socially responsible** teaching and learning, **university-community** partnerships, **inclusive leadership** and integrating social and restorative justice into institutional leadership, governance, management and policy and strategy development.

Institutional transformation

As noted by **Edward Zlotkowski**, a professor of educational policy: "...the very way in which the academy has defined its responsibilities is dangerously incomplete".

He suggests that foundational and professional knowledge should not be the limit of what the academy is obliged to teach. Rather, tertiary institutions must learn to become more fully socially responsible and this has huge implications for global higher education, from transforming the entire curriculum to reinventing teaching strategies to developing more meaningful and experiential learning activities.

To this end, more institutions are taking up the challenge to reinvent their entire mission, vision and values to bring them in alignment with social responsibility and sustainable development.

For example, Portland State University in the United States has transformed its institution by aligning its programmes, curricula, research, teaching, faculty promotion criteria and community engagement with its remit as a socially responsible institution.

As the vice-chancellor of the University of the West of Scotland, **Craig Mahoney**, puts it: "If we're not socially responsible, then there is no future for our universities."

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