

LEARNING CURVE PERSPECTIVE



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The university's role in social innovation

THE recent 6th Global Meeting of Associations co-organised by the International Association of Universities and Inter-American Organization for Higher Education, and hosted by the University of Montreal, Canada, focused on Social Innovation: Challenges and Perspectives for Higher Education.

While it is generally recognised that global and local challenges faced by societies and our shared planet require innovation in all domains, it is usually confined to the use of technology. Social innovation is often marginalised although it is of equal significance and ongoing, resulting in an even more lasting social impact. This is apparent when Réseau Québécois described "a dynamic that, in response to current clearly defined social needs, offers more appropriate and more sustainable solutions".

Social innovations taken up by an institution, an organisation or a community offer measurable benefits for the collective, rather than simply for certain individuals. The impact of social innovation is

transformative and systemic. By its inherent creativity, social innovation represents a break from the norm.

As the need for innovation increases and the expectation that higher education must contribute to it, the theme was of interest to all stakeholders in society including universities. The International Association of Universities is of the opinion that higher education associations are well placed as actors of social innovation to stimulate discussions about creativity. Indeed, the two days of vibrant discussions saw the articulation of many innovative ideas ranging from knowledge democracy, "cognitive justice", new architecture of knowledge, importance of other knowledge as opposed to the current dominant ones, and their place in today's global demands for a fairer, more equitable and sustainable society. In several of these instances, technological innovation alone is insufficient to provide a comprehensive solution. The meeting also explored a number of practices and success stories about the involvement of higher educa-

tion in making social innovation work.

In many ways, the event called for a change in the structure of higher education as well as knowledge so as to allow ideas pertaining to social innovation to permeate more easily into the university systems and the community to allow new innovative ideas to grow socially.

In this respect, various initiatives are in the pipeline such as 50 presidents of leading universities from around the world coming together for the first time for the 2015 Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council initiated by Universität Hamburg president Professor Dr Dieter Lenzen. At the invitation of the German Rectors' Conference, the Körber Foundation and Universität Hamburg, the university leaders will spend June 10-12 at the KörberForum to discuss a global understanding of the university.

The aim is to initiate a university leaders' dialogue on the current key challenges confronting national higher education systems around the globe. Issues range

from threats to university autonomy and academic freedom to conflicting theories of the university and education, and from questions of access to higher education to the financing of university teaching and research.

Lenzen was quoted as saying: "All over the world, the higher education sector is developing without restraint and at a very rapid rate into a private university system with a high degree of social selectivity.

"Important national differences and the achievements of other educational traditions are in danger of disappearing." The Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council with the tagline Sharing Collective Values and decision makers from universities worldwide will aim "to consciously shape the process of worldwide university development, which has so far been driven by global competition".

German Rectors' Conference president Professor Dr Horst Hippler said: "This meeting provides an opportunity to define positions. We aim to encourage an open ex-

change in an intimate atmosphere, free from specific national and supranational obligations. Universities are under considerable economic pressure. Frequently they are the playthings of political developments.

"At the same time, if we want our societies to be innovative and mobile, we need universities to be creative and independent. We will discuss these inconsistencies with reference to such core issues such as university access, educational justice, the financing of teaching, learning and research, and the differentiation of the university landscape."

Körber Foundation executive board member Dr Lothar Dittmer added: "International understanding requires dialogue formats and hosts — this not only applies to foreign and economic policy. We are delighted that university presidents from all continents have accepted our invitation to reflect on shared values in Hamburg.

"Ideally, we will succeed in strengthening the voice of reason which is collectively present in the universities worldwide in a time marked by numerous international conflicts."

Details on the conference are at www.htulc.de

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