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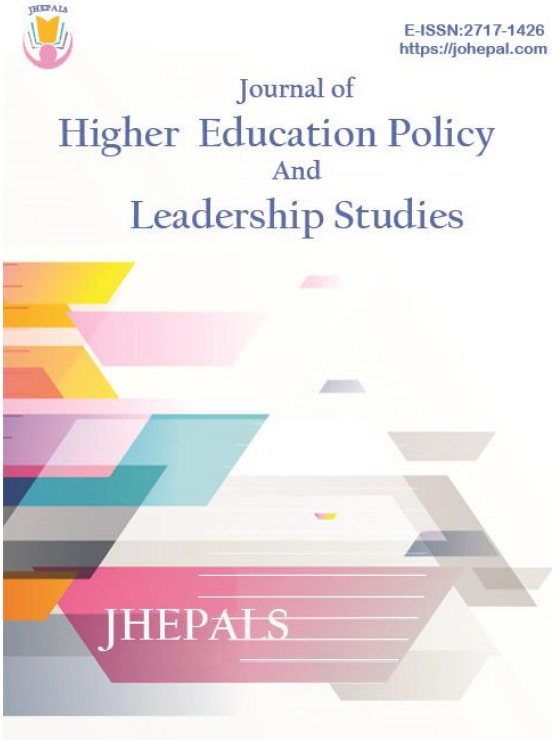

The UNESCO Roadmap for the Transformation of Higher Education: No More Business as Usual --- An Interview with Prof. Francesc Pedró

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Francesc Pedró *

Prof. Francesc Pedró is the Director of the UNESCO Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. He joined UNESCO's education sector in Paris (France) in 2010, where he led the team of education policy, providing technical assistance to UNESCO Member States by reviewing their normative frameworks and lifelong education policies upon request to ensure alignment with SDG 4-Education 2030, and contributing to knowledge dissemination through international comparative analyses. From 2005 to 2011 he worked at the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI). In his capacity as senior policy analyst, he was responsible for a number of projects including the *OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) and the *New Millennium Learners Project*. He was also in charge of the reviews of *educational R&D* in OECD countries and of a project on *Systemic Innovation in Education*, with an emphasis on the impact of innovation in continuous and adult education.

Between 1998 and 2005 he was professor of comparative education and public policies at the Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona) and academic director of its program for educational quality. He also chaired the university entrance examinations system in Catalonia. Prior to this, he was pro-vice chancellor of educational research and innovation, as well as of international relations, at the Open University of Catalonia (Barcelona), the first Internet-based European public university, mostly addressed to cover continuous education needs.

Francesc (Barcelona, 1960) got his MEd degree from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a PhD in Comparative Education from UNED (Madrid). Later he did a postdoc in Comparative Public Policy at the University of London Institute of Education. His main fields of expertise are comparative lifelong education policies and technology use in education, particularly in adult and higher education.

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Interview

It is an honor and privilege for us to host Prof. Francesc Pedró as the Director of IESALC-UNESCO and as a globally renowned scholar and higher education leader whose research, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged worldwide.

We are sure that Prof. Pedró's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

In the context of the globalization of higher education, which is commonly the Americanization of higher education, how can the gap between the quality of higher education in the North and the South be detached? Do organizations like UNESCO have plans in this regard? How?

Answer:

UNESCO promotes international cooperation in education, as well as in culture and science, as a gateway to promote peace -UNESCO's main mission. But it should be well balanced. The acknowledgment of the current situation has been a recurrent theme in the three World Higher Education Conferences that UNESCO has organized, the last one in Barcelona in May 2022. And the Conferences have served as a platform where important initiatives intended to address this imbalance have been launched, like the UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Program launched 30 years ago or the more recent UNESCO Roadmap for the Transformation of Higher Education or the Campus Africa Initiative. On top of this, UNESCO prioritizes technical assistance in higher education to countries whose higher education systems need support to improve access, quality, and inclusion in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Question #2

How do you see the future of the unbalanced monopoly of knowledge production and distribution? How to overcome this unbalanced and uneven monopoly? What is UNESCO's plan in this regard or should it have?

Answer:

International cooperation has become an agenda of increasing strategic importance for higher education (HE) institutions worldwide in response to both the threats and opportunities of globalization, including that of science and research. The global knowledge

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economy -the increasingly globalized, technology- and science-based set of economic relationships that requires high levels of sophisticated international knowledge, skills, and relationships- is strongly impacting international cooperation in HE.

Competition for resources, talent, and access to the best academic journals and top positions in world rankings have become driving forces for international cooperation. In addition, the increase in international students and scholars and international co-authored publications are the driving forces behind national and institutional international cooperation schemes. As a result of international cooperation efforts, higher education institutions (HEIs) can also expect to gain national and international attractiveness as a destination for talented students and faculty and, in some cases, significant financial incentives.

However, this widespread rationale does not account for the full extent of international cooperation in higher education. Many institutions, especially in the Global South, expect much more from international cooperation than access to more resources and greater prestige: they count on opportunities for capacity building, for raising their voice on the international higher education agenda and global research priorities, and, above all, for promoting a humanistic approach to cross-cultural understanding and fertilization. In summary, seen from the Global South, a new paradigm in international cooperation is needed that is bidirectional, on an equal footing between countries and institutions, rather than unidirectional and centered on commercial and economic interests.

Question #3

What are the effects of higher education ranking systems such as Times, QS, ARWU, etc. on higher education policy and governance Orientations? Aren't ranking systems in the direction and at the service of academic capitalism? If they are not so, what are they, then?

Answer:

Rankings are quite often criticized by university leaders and administrators, but they can hardly resist using them to highlight the prestige of their institutions in the absence of something else. National and international excellence initiatives have led to differentiation within national systems by separating an elite sector of world-class universities from other more nationally and regionally oriented research universities. Rankings have come to play a leading role in the construction of excellence schemes. Global ranking has remade global HE as a relational environment. First, through competition, referring to HE as a competitive marketplace of universities and countries. Second, through hierarchy, as a central element of the valuation system. And third, through performance, leading to a relentless culture of continuous improvement at each institution. The growing importance of university rankings has played a key role in the landscape of HE and research collaboration, which is itself indicative of the increasing commercialization and involvement of for-profit companies in all aspects of the international HE agenda.

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Interview

Rankings are an industry that is here to stay. Despite the many criticisms they receive, institutions continue buying the services of companies that provide rankings. And will continue to do so in the future as countries to in well-known international student learning assessments. UNESCO, however, is convinced that what really matters is not the result of a particular ranking but how to promote change and contribute to a culture of quality by cooperating rather than competing. The question at stance should not be who is best, because we all know the reasons behind excellence in global higher education, but rather what you can do to improve the quality, equity, and inclusion at your institution. We need to learn from each other.

Question #4

According to your lived experiences and with a comparative approach, criticize the current policies of higher education in today's world?

Answer:

'Business as usual' is neither sufficient nor acceptable to ensure that people fully exert their right to higher education within free, peaceful, and fair societies. UNESCO urgently calls for substantive changes that help with reimagining our futures and defining clear paths for improving educational experiences and outcomes for all. These paths must involve all stakeholders, starting with students and teachers, but also including HEIs, policymakers, international organizations, development partners, the private sector, civil society, youth organizations, social movements, local communities. They should all be involved in substantive debates on the diverse ways higher education should move forward.

To address these changes UNESCO proposes a roadmap for the transformation of higher education with the following transitions and transformations:

- From viewing HED as elitist, discriminatory, and sometimes alienated from its public tasks, to enabling people's rights to HED, through equitable, funded, and sustainable access.

- From a restrictive focus on disciplinary or professional training to a holistic student learning experience.

- From disciplinary silos to inter- and trans- disciplinarity, open dialogue and active collaboration among diverse perspectives.

- From assuming HED comes immediately after secondary education to a lifelong learning approach aimed at serving the diverse education needs of youth and adults.

- From a hierarchical and weakly connected archipelago of institutions and programmes to an integrated system with diversity of programmes and flexible learning pathways connecting them so as to enlarge the educational opportunities for youth and adults and avoid dead ends.

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- From an industrial model of schooling to pedagogically informed and technologically enriched higher learning experiences where learners manage their own learner pathways.

Question #5

What are your reflections and alternative policies for intelligently facing the future of higher education, and what are the tips you consider for their implementation?

Answer:

Under the overarching framework of being a component of the right to education and fulfilling a public good mission aligned with the SDGs, HED systems and institutions can be guided by six key principles as they look towards 2030, building a new social contract for higher education:

- Inclusion, equity, and pluralism. Achieving greater inclusion and promoting pluralism in HED is a strong social justice imperative, an objective reflected in target 4.3 of the SDGs about 'equal access to affordable technical, vocational and higher education.' Effective education and training systems where opportunities are equally distributed are the basis for sustainable development and the construction of fair, peaceful, and democratic societies.

- Academic freedom and participation of all stakeholders. HEIs are well-placed to offer a safe space to present and assess a diversity of views and engage with society in public debates on complex issues. It is essential to protect the academic freedom of staff and students from political interference. This requires a high degree of institutional autonomy and self-governance as well as an adequate balance between autonomy and public accountability.

- Inquiry, critical thinking, and creativity. HEIs have a unique responsibility to teach how to distinguish real evidence from fabricated information and to apply knowledge to problem-solving in every walk of life. Truth-seeking skills should be at the core of every curriculum at every educational level, including in HED.HED has the power to enhance creativity, ignite imagination, and promote divergent thinking, preparing students to find innovative solutions to address the global challenges.

- Integrity and ethics. HEIs must place a strong emphasis on ethical values and behaviours to promote honesty, tolerance, and solidarity. All graduates should be prepared to become professionals who are agents of social responsibility, champions of sustainability and citizens longing for social justice.

- Commitment to sustainability and social responsibility. Through training, research, and engagements with local, national, regional, and global communities, all HEIs can contribute actively to building a more sustainable world. Behaving with social responsibility is central to the development of the green economy and societal well-being.

- Excellence through cooperation rather than competition. Universities and other types of HEIs can perform their educational missions more effectively through cooperation and

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solidarity. This helps work in an interdisciplinary manner, pool scientific resources across academic units and institutions, share knowledge and experience through professional networks at the national and international level to achieve synergies.

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