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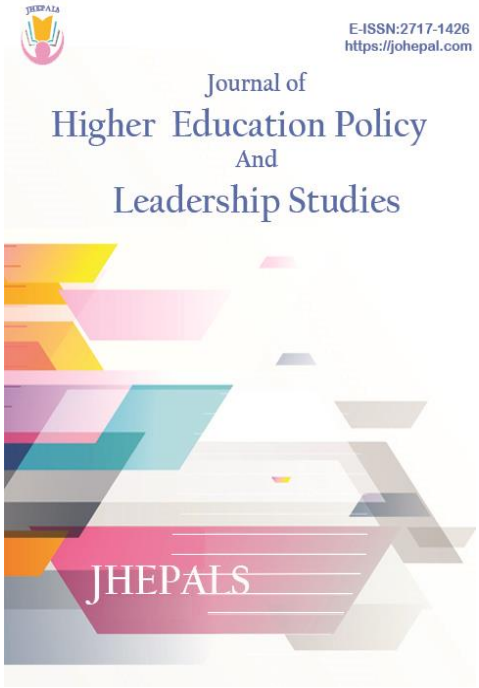

The Transformation Agenda -- Rethinking Higher Education from a Glocal Perspective: Interview with Prof. Dr. Robert Lepenies

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Interview

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Robert Lepenies *

Prof. Dr. Robert Lepenies is University President and Professor of Heterodox and Pluralist Economics at Karlshochschule International University in Karlsruhe.

He was a research scientist at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research and executive committee member of the Global Young Academy. He holds a Ph.D from the Hertie School of Governance, a MSc in International Political Economy from the London School of Economics, and a BA in PPE from the University of Oxford (The Queen's College). He works on the politics of nudging & on themes in the philosophy of the social sciences (economics), international political economy, and public policy. He has held post-doctoral positions at the European University Institute and at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB; Center for Global Constitutionalism). He held visiting fellowships at Yale University and the FU Berlin. He has received several academic prizes, among them the WIWA Young Scholars Award for Pluralism in Economics (2015), the A.SK Social Sciences Post-Doctoral Award (2016) as well as awards and scholarships such as a Fulbright-Schuman Stipend (2012) and two Max Weber Fellowships (2013-2015). He was elected to the Global Young Academy in 2016 where he served on the executive committee from 2019 - 2021.

Prof. Lepenies is among Germany's youngest university presidents. A champion of sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation in higher education, his work bridges academia, policy, and societal impact.

https://karlsuniversity.de/en/university/professors/prof-dr-robert-lepenies.html

https://globalyoungacademy.net/rlepenies/

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Interviews with globally recognized scholars within the realm of HE policy and leadership give us a novel and new chance to learn from wealth of knowledge and expertise which, in most cases, are from years of enormous and continuous research.

JHEPALS has the honor and privilege to publish an exclusive interview with Prof. Dr. Robert Lepenies (President of Karlshochschule International University - Germany); a world renowned Young HE leader (Under 40) with extensive research and leadership experience; and passionate about advancing excellence and innovation in teaching, learning, and knowledge exchange, and fostering a culture of inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment across the university.

We are sure that Prof. Dr. Robert Lepenies's insightful, illuminating and critical responses enriched with her academic/ leadership experience in higher education and global cooperation will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

As an eminent young Higher Education leader (under 40), what are your advice/suggestions for HE leaders worldwide?

Answer:

Leadership in higher education today requires three core commitments: embrace adaptability, champion sustainability, and prioritize inclusivity. The challenges of the Anthropocene demand institutions to rethink their purpose—not as mere knowledge disseminators but as active contributors to societal transformation.

My advice to leaders is to make your institution a living laboratory for change. Often, this is not possible – in that case, try to create pockets in which experimentation is encouraged. Listen to students and faculty and stakeholders; their perspectives often hold the seeds of innovation. Or even more frequently, there is already a lot of innovation in an institution – it is just not spoken about loudly enough. Your job as leader is to be the loudspeaker for innovation that is already there – and I am thinking of various kinds of innovation here: cultural, technological or social.

For example, "future skills" have been all the rage recently in higher education debates – but at Karlshochschule, in our model of small group seminars in the management and social sciences where we engage in service learning on very concrete glocal (locally rooted, globally oriented) projects, we have been developing exactly these future skills for a long time already – without calling them "future skills". Uncovering such innovations and speaking loudly about them is the job of HE leaders.

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It helps to align an institutional vision with global goals like the SDGs, recognizing that education is central to addressing climate change, inequality, and other critical issues. Currently, the big challenge in the sector is of course digitalisation – we need to engage with new technologies, such as AI, with both ambition and caution. These tools can transform learning, but their ethical and equitable use should always be the priority. Lead with humility but also with boldness. I oscillate between these extremes.

Question #2

What facts and figures are important to you in the field of Higher Education Policy? We'd be pleased to learn your critical point of view about these facts and figures.

Answer:

A critical issue in higher education policy today is the over-reliance on rankings and metrics as proxies for success and excellence. A global obsession with university rankings—based on publication counts, citation indices, income from grants—is creating a culture of **metricization** that undermines the true purpose of education. These metrics prioritize measurable outputs at the expense of values like equity, creativity, and societal relevance. For example, rankings often incentivize institutions to focus on research over teaching, sidelining the broader mission of universities to cultivate critical thinkers and active citizens. They fail to account for the social responsibility of universities or the diverse ways in which institutions contribute to their local and global communities. Recent work by the **Global Young Academy** has highlighted the unintended consequences of this metric-driven culture. In terms of research assessment, I can recommend initiatives such as the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA).

Narrow indicators can distort priorities, discourage interdisciplinary work, and marginalize research areas that do not align with mainstream academic trends. Metrics can even exacerbate inequalities, favoring resource-rich institutions while disadvantaging those in underfunded regions or focused on non-traditional outputs.

The way forward requires a recalibration of how we measure success in higher education. Policymakers and institutions must complement quantitative indicators with **qualitative, context-sensitive approaches.** Instead of solely asking how many papers were published, we should ask what impact they had on society. But also here, there's no one-size-fits all solution – I am glad that we are a university of applied (social) sciences which naturally attracts specific scholars and students that similarly think in this direction. Hence, instead of ranking institutions, we should celebrate diverse contributions to education, research, and community engagement – individually and institutionally. By shifting the focus from metrics

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to meaning, higher education can better align with its mission of advancing knowledge, fostering innovation, and serving the public good.

Question #3

How do you portray the social responsibility of universities in Germany? Can the leadership of today's universities play a robust role against the inequality in the production and consumption of knowledge or equal access to quality higher education for all?

Answer:

Universities bear a profound social responsibility. They are institutions of learning and can be key drivers of societal change – as education always is. Our institutional mission is described by the attempt of becoming a transversity – a university that aims to contribute to transformation. By actively engaging with local communities, being transdisciplinary, championing open alliances, universities can contribute to addressing inequality in the production and consumption of knowledge. However, their impact is inherently shaped by the larger educational and welfare system they operate within—a system in Germany that struggles with issues of social mobility.

University leadership must confront these challenges head-on, tailoring their strategies to the unique mission and structure of their institutions. For example, at Karlshochschule, we strive to align our curriculum with the principles of justice, sustainability, and inclusivity. As a private, non-profit university with a strong international focus, we recognize that we occupy a niche position. Our approach centers on critically examining the societal and ecological costs of our economic systems and equipping students with the tools to create meaningful change ("making the world at least a bit better").

While our emphasis at Karlshochschule is on curriculum design, we see this as part of a broader effort to redefine what a business and management school can be: not just a pipeline for corporate leadership but a space where students playfully negotiate and practice the pressing challenges of our time. Universities must acknowledge their role as both participants in and critics of the systems they serve, ensuring their contributions promote equity and sustainability at every level.

Question #4

How do you see higher education policymakers in terms of knowledge, field expertise, experience in university education, and a correct understanding of the realities of the higher education system?

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Answer:

Effective higher education policymakers must be more than administrators; they must also be listeners, collaborators, and visionaries. The best policymakers are those who understand the realities of education at the ground level—engaging directly with educators and students while considering the structural barriers they face. They must – just like everyone at university – consider themselves as learners first, leaders second.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a gap between expertise and practice. Addressing this requires better integration between academia and policy. We need stronger platforms for collaboration where ideas can be tested and refined, ensuring that policies are both ambitious and grounded in the lived realities of institutions. But to be honest, when thinking of it more critically, platforms exist and so do intelligent policymakers as well as leaders – the problem is rather that education – just like most societal subsystems – is in a state of perpetual crisis and short-term thinking. What's needed is time to reflect (the german word is "Muße", otium – time that one can freely choose to spend in non-instrumental ways). I think this is what's missing most.

Question #5

How do you evaluate the way higher education managers deal with the subject of education policy?

Answer:

I find the nomenclature of "managers" within higher education somewhat unsettling. It risks reducing academic leadership to a transactional, business-like function, neglecting the deeper purpose of universities as places of learning, reflection, and societal progress. In Germany, I think this is widely shared even within the private university landscape. True leaders in higher education are not just managers (or at least, they will find it hard to find any followers)—as they ought be facilitators of knowledge creation, stewards of institutional values, and advocates for the transformative power of education. They must navigate policy with a vision that extends beyond compliance or value maximization, ensuring that every decision contributes meaningfully to their institution's mission and to the broader societal good.

A most effective approach lies in co-production—actively involving faculty, staff, and students in the design and refinement of policies to ensure they are both practical and impactful. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the power of agile and inclusive leadership, where proactive collaboration and adaptability turned unprecedented challenges into opportunities for innovation. This kind of leadership should become the

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standard, fostering environments where policies are not merely enforced but genuinely embraced by all stakeholders.

Question #6

Is there a conflict of interest between the policies established and communicated by the macro level of higher education and the universities at the operational level, which act as policy implementers? If your opinion is positive, point out some cases of conflict of interest.

Answer:

Yes, these conflicts often arise. For instance, outdated regulatory standards that are not aligned with modern didactic approaches can sometimes stifle innovative programs tailored to local needs or global challenges. Similarly, policies focused on rankings and metrics may inadvertently deprioritize teaching quality or equity-focused initiatives. But I have to say that in most cases, I have been extremely glad about the existing regulations at the German and European level, as they safeguard educational quality. As a small institution, we have to work hard to show that we provide education at the highest quality level. Showing that we comply with national and state regulation is a demanding undertaking – but it is here where we can show to students that we are serious about our mission.

Question #7

It seems that the internationalization of higher education is a dynamic and evolving landscape in Germany. What are the current trends of international students' mobility and related policies in Germany?

Answer:

Internationalization in Germany is highly dynamic, but its success depends on how well we navigate both opportunities and persistent challenges. Germany has long been a magnet for international students due to its reputation for academic excellence, affordability, and global partnerships. Yet, the evolving geopolitical landscape—marked by isolationist policies in some regions due to the surge of right-wing authoritarianism—has made it increasingly vital for Germany to reaffirm its commitment to fostering global mobility.

While I hope that partnerships especially with the Global South could represent an important step toward more equitable exchanges, these efforts are hindered by shrinking budgets for funding programs that support such collaborations. Similarly, the promise of virtual mobility—praised for its potential to make internationalization more inclusive—has

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yet to materialize at scale. Persistent barriers, such as visa restrictions and limited financial resources for underrepresented groups, further constrain access. Addressing these systemic issues is essential to sustain Germany's leadership in global higher education.

At Karlshochschule International University, internationalization is not just a strategic goal but a lived reality. Despite being a small institution, we have over 100 partner universities worldwide and deeply integrate global perspectives into our programs. Our students learn multiple languages, spend a mandatory semester abroad, and engage with area studies, preparing them to thrive in a globalized world. This commitment extends to our Erasmus+ projects, such as the *Re-Direction* project, where we collaborate with universities in Ukraine and Georgia to redesign curricula, fostering resilience and innovation in challenging contexts.

Creating a welcoming environment for international students also means embracing cultural quirks with good humor. For instance, new arrivals in Baden-Württemberg might be surprised to learn that while Germans are known for their *Brezeln* and Oktoberfest, mentioning the latter here may earn you a lecture on how Karlsruhe is neither in Swabia nor Bavaria but in proud Baden! These small cultural moments are part of the richness of internationalization, teaching students far more than they could learn in a (virtual) classroom alone.

Ultimately, internationalization in Germany must go beyond mobility numbers or rankings. It requires sustained investment, policies that break down systemic barriers, and a focus on meaningful cross-cultural engagement. At its best, it's about building bridges—between countries, cultures, and people—and ensuring that higher education remains a force for global understanding and collaboration.

Question #8

How do you define a leading international university in the context of Germany? What are the focal characteristics of a leading international university in the age of artificial intelligence?

Answer:

A leading international university is one where intercultural engagement thrives—where students and faculty actively collaborate across cultures on practical challenges. At Karlshochschule, this means integrating teamwork into our management and social sciences programs, ensuring students learn to lead and innovate in international settings. Our Master in Social Transformation captures this ethos, teaching students to lead themselves, others, and then leading change through creativity and collaboration.

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In the age of AI, a leading university must test new technologies critically in class, together. AI's impact is profound, but it can isolate individuals and hinder collaboration if misused. Ideally, I would like to embed AI in group-based learning, focusing on teamwork and ethical engagement with technology. This prepares students to navigate AI's challenges while building the soft skills essential for international teams.

Ultimately, a leading international university must foster inclusion, innovation, and impact. It must embrace diversity, rethink education to address real-world challenges, and guide students to critically and responsibly engage with the tools of tomorrow.

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