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Communicating the social sciences to society

Strengthening the contributions of the social sciences to contemporary society is the central theme of a substantial 400-page report from UNESCO and the International Social Science Council, released in June, and drawing together over 100 authors from across the globe. The world must address a range of complex social problems – climate, conflict, and disease, as well as the more enduring problems of inequality, exclusion and welfare. Existing social science knowledge, and the future knowledge that their methods and analytical tools can unlock, offers great potential. Accordingly there is a need to strengthen basic social research, and also to improve the way scholars engage with the myriad challenges facing their countries and communities. Where they are doing so, they also need to be able to communicate it better. The report was preceded late last year by the European Science Foundation's 'Vital Questions', which specifically tackles the contribution of social science to European integration, but emphasises many of the same themes, and social sciences 'great responsibility and... great opportunity'.

The social sciences, UNESCO/ISSC argue, are currently hampered by a series of 'knowledge divides': research capacities are unequal between regions; thinking, concepts and analytical approaches are fragmented across disciplines and countries. As well as addressing a series of important questions (capacity, mobility, marketization, the hegemonies of language and discourse etc.), it also serves as a valuable compendium of essays which chart the 'institutional geography' of social research and the challenges faced in specific regions. The concern that both reports have with the wider contribution of research is

unsurprising, not least because HE is increasingly judged on social value. But it also pushes social scientists to articulate their thinking more clearly to those who (in the case of publicly funded research) ultimately support their endeavours. It also draws in questions of how the social sciences engage with policy domains, how this can influence research agendas, and how to balance this with the need for a responsive and critically distanced scholarship. Collectively the reports point to the need for social science communities to be less diffident and more aware of the need to demonstrate and communicate their potential. They also serve as an appeal for their states and societies to recognise this and to continue to support the more measured, critical analysis that they can offer.

A concern with useable policy outputs seems to inform many funding frameworks and a greater focus on 'problem-oriented' and 'policy-relevant research' is now regularly required. The need to bring to bear the expertise and analytical power of sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, historians, economists, and lawyers – individually and collectively as interdisciplinary teams – seems obvious. Valuable in their own right, they can also enhance the social value of the natural sciences and the technology fields. But while social scientists are regularly sought out to answer the most complex problems that governments face, as the ESF report argues, the complexities and nuances of social research are often under-appreciated, ignored or misunderstood. Policymakers are often more comfortable contradicting or dismissing a sociologist than they are a physicist.

As the UNESCO/ISSC report notes, the capacities, resources and interests of research communities across the world differ greatly. HE decline and stagnation in some countries has been met by a growth in externally funded NGOs with a mandate for social research, drawing social scientists out of their academic homes. Although in some cases this has provided a vital refuge, it has also generated an internal brain drain. The risk is that the doing of research will be dislocated from the training of future generations, and from the exploration of new theory. They also push researchers towards short-term and shifting research questions, driven more by the concerns of funders and clients than they are by local needs. Even within HE the 'internationalisation' trend often renders much locally relevant research knowledge invisible; both its answers and its conceptual underpinnings. Unable to make it into internationally ranked journals, vital work is frequently under-acknowledged and under-rewarded. The careers and motivations of those who produce it suffer as a result, as do vital opportunities for new thinking and approaches to be developed.

Even in much better-resourced contexts, the social science landscape is less exclusively academic, populated by a variety of research organisations which seek much closer relationships to policy communities. In some instances this has helped to encourage a more responsive, society-oriented type of research, addressing real problems and fostering a more engaged and communicative social science. This plurality can be a real strength, but it can also bring its problems. Various authors point to dangers inherent in the marketization of research, the atomisation of knowledge, the disconnection between theoretical development and practice, distortions in agendas and approaches (due to the financial or media incentives in tackling some questions above others), and the habit of reinforcing (rather than challenging) commonly held ideas.

Social sciences should continue to play a vital role in shaping public understanding and policy. But how can they communicate this better – both what they do, and why they do it? Ideas of human behaviour and the complexities of social living regularly enter popular discourse via the mass media. How can researchers communicate – and be properly credited for – the fact that *this* is social science? And how can they encourage a greater critical engagement with this? In their drive to communicate and respond, how do they ensure that they aren't led by politics or the media, both in the questions they address or the speed at which they are pushed to analyse and report? And how do those who fund them ensure that they are accorded the time and space that the considered exploration of complex problems, and the development of new paradigms requires? If a will to communicate can be matched to a commitment to let them to what they do best, the social sciences will surely be able to serve society all the better.

Sources:

- World Social Science Report 2010: Knowledge Divides (Paris: UNESCO/ISSC) (www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/resources/reports/world-social-science-report).
- Vital Questions: the Contribution of European Social Science. (European Science Foundation, 2009) (www.esf.org/research-areas/social-sciences.html).

Doctoral futures

A collaborative project 'Careers of Doctorate Holders' (CDH), between the OECD, UIS and Eurostat, represents the 'first large-scale data collection' on the careers and mobility of doctorate holders. Further

interest in its initial findings has been generated by several more recent initiatives promoting doctoral study, analysing researcher behaviour, and recording postgraduate enrolment and graduation patterns. As competition for higher education and employment intensifies, changing ideas on what doctoral study now represents could become increasingly influential in determining policy within HEIs, whether in its status as a qualification or in how to respond to wider international student recruitment and labour market trends.

The motive behind the CDH project (launched in 2004) was the need for internationally comparable indicators on the careers and mobility of doctorate holders, and, by extension, the employment conditions of the highly-qualified. Responses from 25 OECD countries confirm a dramatic increase in the number of doctoral graduates (a 40% rise between 1998 and 2006), reflecting in part greater participation by women. Steady growth is 'expected to continue'. The highest totals were in the US and Germany, with natural sciences being the leading subject area across all countries. The labour market for doctorate holders was revealed to be markedly internationalised – more than for other tertiary-level graduates, and a significant proportion of doctoral graduates in Western European countries were international students. Doctorate holders moving within Europe were principally from other European countries (France, Germany, and the UK were the leading destinations cited), while movement to the US was dominated by Asian-born students – particularly from China, India, and South Korea. Although the research records low actual unemployment rates for doctorates, it acknowledges the transition to full employment 'may...take some time, up to four or five years', a situation inevitably since exacerbated by current economic conditions which are likely to see temporary or project contracts become more prevalent. The immediate pressures on universities and the public sector more generally may make future post-doctoral positions within HE even less certain. In conclusion it predicts a continued flow of 'new doctoral graduates in the next decades', despite the working conditions for researchers remaining unattractive.

The further CDH data collection exercise (2009-2010) which is currently underway may well qualify findings from the 2007 figures, if only by focusing interest on the value of investment and value of a training period which lasts several years. Different scenarios are plausible. Doctoral-level enrolment could continue to increase, intensified by deteriorating labour market conditions, the demand for expertise and research-based skills and competition within a growing graduate and Masters-level talent pool. A counter-argument would be that the appeal of a doctorate may diminish as both institutional costs and personal debts rise, and the need for current employment (regardless of level) intensifies. In either case the structure and coverage of doctorates and how they are used may change, reflecting not only concerns over graduate employability but also worries that the PhD can no longer guarantee a research career.

Recent statistics for both the US and Canada confirm a high demand for doctoral study, albeit reflecting decisions made well before the current economic crisis. In 2008 Canada awarded the highest number of doctorates since 1992; in the US it was the highest number ever (some 48,802). Elsewhere the regular publication of completion rates indicates the pressures on students and institutions.

A joint JISC/British Library 'Researchers of Tomorrow' study analyses how current UK-based doctoral students approach their work, and how their research needs can be met, particularly from a library/information or policy-makers' perspective. Valuably it highlights the skills which doctorates foster and, perhaps less predictably, indicates the continuity in research requirements between generations. The first annual report of this 3-year study points to the value of openly accessible research information but the notes the frustrations researchers encounter in accessing full-text sources in some cases. It notes the continuing dependence of doctoral students on libraries, but also their different expectations and ways of using them. (Some actively seek library support/expertise; others value its IT provision, simply as an additional way of accessing a range of resources). More structured ways in which concerns over employability are being addressed include: research skills support, doctoral training centres (DTCs), and new doctoral research models (eg the New Route PhD, and interdisciplinary/international PhD programmes). In Australia recent research has also re-valued the benefits of non-formal learning (the editing of student-run journals for example) in doctoral education.

The emphasis in recent years on undergraduate/taught postgraduate recruitment and exchange has drawn attention away from the expansion of doctorate enrolment and international research opportunities. Current projects show that doctoral study is also subject to the twin pressures of employability and skills agendas, now exaggerated by increasing unemployment. Reforming PhDs to provide better links with research careers, wherever they are based is, therefore, persuasive. Yet many pursuing doctorates are motivated by the subject itself and a love of learning. Tying the PhD too restrictively to current and very specific career needs will potentially be counterproductive, not least because of the duration of doctorates and the varied research interests and networks which evolve in this time. It may also mean that subject interests shift, emphasising the PhD as more of a professional qualification rather than as an exploratory research period. Although this might allow for a more secure postdoctoral career, it could also be a less genuinely research-oriented one.

Sources:

- Careers of Doctorate Holders: Employment and Mobility Patterns (OECD) (2010) (www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_34451_39945471_1_1_1_1,00.html)
 - Canada (Stats Can) (www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/100714/dq100714a-eng.htm; www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/100714/dq100714b-eng.htm)
 - US (NSF) (www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf10309/content.cfm?pub_id=3996&id=4)
 - HEFCE Research degree qualification rates (7/10) (www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2010/10_21/)
 - Researchers of Tomorrow (www.jisc.ac.uk/news/stories/2010/07/generationY.aspx; www.researchersoftomorrow.net)
 - 'Doctoral students as journal editors: non-formal learning through academic work' (Higher Education Research & Development, 29(3), (6/10)) (Hopwood, N.) (www.informaworld.com/smpp/content-content=a921519069-db=all-jumtype=rss)
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Skills, labour and student mobility: developing HE policy

Global Employment Trends for Youth, issued by the ILO last month, records the highest ever number of unemployed young people worldwide in 2009 - an estimated 81 million. Further research from the World Bank and OECD also reports on trends in employability and skills, as well as patterns in global labour mobility and migration. Higher education now influences and must also respond to broader international policy issues such as these, a situation emphasised by HE internationalisation and economic interdependence.

The ILO study focuses in detail on the effect of the global economic crisis, analysing labour market trends, and evaluating lessons learned from youth employment schemes. It highlights particularly the dramatic impact on developing countries, not least because of demographics ('as much as 90% of [the world's young] are living in developing economies in 2010'); it documents the rise in poverty, underemployment, and a 'lost generation' without realistic work opportunities. Poverty, with its impact on child health, and the need for children also to work to help support the family, can also mean that education becomes less valued; this in turn affects the overall quality of schools and, in the long-term, national economic growth. The ILO also gives evidence of the increases, worldwide, in the 'educated unemployed', with apparent over-qualification and unrealised career paths underlining a widespread mismatch between curricula, training, and current skills needs. It is an issue which each new graduate cohort seems to highlight, and is increasingly reflected internationally in two leading (and sometimes linked) factors driving migration: the demand for study abroad to access more or better training, and the need to travel simply to find work.

The economic crisis has focused renewed interest on defining and valuing skills, whether for individual careers or business. Skills-based organisations have been set up, related strategies identified, and targeted courses developed, with the 'demand for skills' routinely cited. One recent example of an international initiative is the World Bank's STEP (Skills Toward Employment and Productivity) framework; it gives recommendations to help design 'systems to impart skills that enhance productivity and growth'. The importance of 'high-level cognitive skills' is emphasised, with job-relevant skills recognised as including ways of thinking and communicating, rather than simply qualifications or competence for a specific career. More widely the efforts to improve skills to encourage employability characterise much donor support for higher and further education, not least the World Bank's own Education Strategy and projects. (Among recent evidence is a 'Skills and Training Enhancement Project' in Bangladesh for example – its aim is to 'increase the country's competitiveness in global labour and export markets').

Meanwhile, more 'skills selective criteria', or points-based systems' are being introduced by some governments, in part responding to concerns over the pressure which immigration can be perceived to place on public services and labour markets. Sometimes these are linked to tougher international student visa requirements, particularly for entry to sub-degree colleges, and in clarifying residency entitlements on completion of a period of study. Australia has introduced a new Skilled Occupations List and the UK has announced planned immigration limits for migrant workers. In the UK, figures released last month indicate a net increase in migration, with research also showing that 20% of students remain in the country five years after receiving their visas. The OECD's latest annual 'International Migration Outlook' also includes, for the first time, information on the levels of student numbers remaining in their host countries after completing their studies, indicating that these varied between 15 and 35% in 2007. Nevertheless international migration fell as the economic downturn took hold. The flow of immigrants to OECD countries decreased in 2008 and is expected to fall further given that some of the sectors in which migrant workers traditionally find employment have been particularly badly affected by the recession.

The dilemma governments face while restricting immigration is to continue to compete for the best international students, staff, and expertise - particularly in subject areas of high demand. Promoting a country as an inclusive education destination, while simultaneously making student entry tougher, signals a confusing if not negative message. It could at least mean that while seeking to reduce overall international student migration, and being more selective in recruiting the most able international students to established institutions, high achievers are also dissuaded. Differing messages for home and international audiences could also make it difficult at an institutional level. How do universities respond when governments on the one hand seek to widen access, and to position their universities as destinations of choice internationally, whilst also introducing restrictions on student mobility on the other?

Interest in trends in global labour and student mobility have been heightened by the economic crisis – at one level simply because of the linked economies which exist, but also as the competition for skills and international student income has intensified. There is, likewise, an apparently increasing policy overlap between international education, labour, and migration issues, with recent research from various sources reflecting common emphases on skills deficits, employability, graduate unemployment, and controlled immigration. In this context how independent can national strategies for higher education be? How focused can, or should, they be on the specific and future needs of the domestic HE sector, and to what extent are they being driven instead by international pressures? And may it be that the priorities which have been attached by HEIs to internationalisation are now being challenged by the need to serve, perhaps as previously, local communities, whether in terms of student enrolment or employment. The growth of part-time, casual, and voluntary jobs more flexible (and less secure) careers, increasing dependence on online working, are general trends, but the need to find work on graduation, in any sector, may well be a local and immediate one.

Sources:

- Global Employment Trends for Youth: special issue on the impact of the global economic crisis on youth (ILO) (www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Press_releases/lang--en/WCMS_143356/index.htm)
- Stepping Up Skills - for More Jobs and Higher Productivity (World Bank) (<http://go.worldbank.org/XGREOWYUX0>)
- World Bank Supports Workforce Training and Skills Development in Bangladesh (2010/469/SAR) (10/6/10) (<http://go.worldbank.org/X5SF9TS9K1>)
- International Migration Outlook 2010 (OECD) (www.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/display.asp?K=5KMHDCD2KK35&CID=&LANG=EN)
- Australia – Department of Immigration and Citizenship (new Skilled Occupations List) (1/7/10) (www.immi.gov.au/skilled/general-skilled-migration/whats-new.htm)
- UK Home Office – consultation launched on limiting immigration (30/6/10) (www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/press-releases/consultation-limit-immigrate)
- Student immigration levels unsustainable says minister (BBC news) (6/9/10) (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11191341)

Other news

ACU Conferences/Meetings (forthcoming)

- Making the best use of Africa's graduates and the role of international partnerships (ACU; British Council); Accra, Ghana; 16-18 January 2011 (www.acu.ac.uk/graduate_employment)
- Risk, Reputation and Reform: Developing new business in a changing environment (ACU Conference of Executive Heads); Hong Kong, China; 6-8 April 2011 (www.acu.ac.uk)

Europe

- New 'Lifelong Learning: higher education and international affairs' directorate set up (7/10). This new administrative arrangement establishes a more co-ordinated structure for the support and representation of HE (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/organi_en.pdf) (www.ukro.ac.uk/insight/ei1007.pdf) (see p12)
- PromoDoc – the promotion of doctoral education. A consortium of European HE organisations - funded by the EC and led by Campus France with the British Council, DAAD, NUFFIC, as well as the New-York-based IIE - is to launch a 3-year project (wef December 2010) to promote doctoral study. It particularly aims to widen international access especially in 'targeted industrialised countries and territories' (i.e. Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and the US) (www.aca-secretariat.be/index.php?id=29&tx_smfacanewsletter_pi1%5Bnl_uid%5D=66&tx_smfacanewsletter_pi1%5Buid%5D=2185&tx_smfacanewsletter_pi1%5BbackPid%5D=272&cHash=60a432703a6c93f0a4700ca0d8ef0dc9)

Latin America/Caribbean

- OBSMAC (Observatory for Academic and Scientific Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean). A new Observatory aims to track and analyse regional policy and effects of migration. It is co-ordinated by Sylvie Didou Aupetit - a UNESCO chair and researcher at DIE-CINVESTSAT (Mexico) and author of 'Brain Drain, Academic

Mobility, and Scientific Networks' (2010) (19/3/10)

(www.iesalc.unesco.org.ve/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1814%3Ase-activa-observatorio-sobre-las-movilidades-academicas-y-cientificas-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe-osmac&catid=100%3Aen-portada&Itemid=449&lang=en)

World Bank

- Education Strategy 2020 (VC-NET 96,(6-7/10). The Draft Strategy is due to be available on the World Bank site Sept/2010. (<http://go.worldbank.org/DTQZ9EKJW0>)

Key publications

A selection of recent publications on higher education:

Cross-National Higher Education Performance Indicators: ISI Publication Output Figures for 16 Selected African Universities [Boshoff, N.; 2010; CHET, for HERANA]

Comparative publication levels using the Web of Science (WoS) citation database. (www.chet.org.za/webfm_send/630).

Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators [OECD; 2010]

Influential annual report with comparative statistics. It includes figures for the costs and benefits of education, with measures on participation and the 'learning environment'.

(www.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/display.asp?K=5KMHBJFCSKHJ&CID=&LANG=EN).

Internationalization of Higher Education: Global Trends, Regional Perspectives (IAU 3rd Global Survey Report) [IAU; due 9/2010]

The largest such study worldwide - based on 2009 data from 115 countries – recording the effect of internationalisation on HE. Revised analysis since the previous such IAU study (2005) (www.iau-aiu.net/internationalization/pdf/Internationalisation_Order_Form_2010.pdf).

The Changing Face of EU-African Co-operation in Science and Technology: Past Achievements and Looking Ahead to the Future [EC Directorate General for Research, International Co-operation; 2010]

Summarises development of EU/African S&T co-operation, with studies of successful co-operative research projects by theme (<http://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/index.cfm?lg=en&pg=allpublications>).

The Economic Consequences of 'Brain Drain' of the Best and Brightest: Microeconomic Evidence from Five Countries (WB Policy Research Working Paper, 5394) (8/10) [Gibson, J.; McKenzie, D.; 2010; World Bank Development Research Group – Finance and Private Sector Development Team]

Close study of the impact of emigration of the highly skilled from specific countries, showing individual and wider economic benefits (<http://go.worldbank.org/B4CXKOV2X0>).

The authors Nick Mulhern and Jonathan Harle are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655. This and previous issues can also be accessed online at: www.acu.ac.uk/member_services/research_and_policy_analysis/vc_net
