

HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND POWER WHO BENEFITS, WHO PAYS?

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The challenges in higher education are multiple and point up general problems in how knowledge is discovered, consumed, and distributed – the economy of knowledge, in the broadest sense of that word. Like any economy, the reality of power relations is crucial in, even constitutive of it – i.e., power defines what is known, how it is known, and who can know it. While the conference aims to address “humanity” generally, I will focus on Indonesia with a sideglance at the United States, as one of the hegemons in international education, highly influential in its models of what education is and should be.

The challenges are, among others: (1) What does a university education consist of? Is it meant to prepare a student for a place in the work economy, or does it entail broader moral or political aims – creating ethical, tolerant, civic-minded or patriotic citizens, for instance?; (2) Are certain fields of knowledge/study more important than others, or have they come to be? Here we come upon the problem of humanities/social sciences versus hard science (or STEM) fields, and the question of the value of what is called a “liberal education”; (3) Since professors, scientists, and students alike are all meant to create new knowledge through research, what is the quality and relevance of that research, and how can quality and relevance be measured? Here we confront the huge issue of evaluation, which has led to universities being treated like businesses and the whole rise of metrics like KPIs. (4) How is new knowledge – the results of research – used, consumed, intermediated and disseminated? For instance, some research is meant to influence policy (e.g., governmental or pedagogical, etc.); some to influence practice (medical or environmental); and some research

¹ The abstract and paper are the personal opinions of the author and do not reflect the official policy of AMINEF.

is not utilitarian, but aims to enlighten, inform, stimulate, or even please. Here is where the powerful technological tools of the last decades come in: these provide access to millions of texts in books and articles and web postings – an access unimagined just a few years back.

Relating to these four areas of challenge, maybe the way to get at the question of power relations is to look at how education, research, and publication/dissemination are sustained. That is, where does the money come from? What are the relative roles of public (government) funding, private for-profit funding, and private non-profit funding? For example, has government abandoned its role in funding higher education (a criticism coming to the fore in the US, where students have become paying customers and racking up unprecedented amounts of personal debt to pay for their educations)? What are the dangers of leaving research funding to the private sector or the “market” to decide (cf., the abandonment of the humanities, because they are inherently less “profitable” in a market model)? How can knowledge dissemination inform and stimulate public debate if it must also be wary of government sensitivities on what can or cannot be said (see the controversy on oil palm plantations and forest fires, or the controversy on rewriting the history of the events of 1965 in Indonesia that contradicts the Soeharto New Order era version), or if it must please the private sector donors who fund it? What about knowledge created and disseminated by “Others” – outsiders, foreigners – about whose motives “we insiders” should be suspicious? Yet, then, what of the “international community of scholars,” the “world of scholarship,” collaborations across vast spaces made possible through new technologies – are they not the reality of the present and future, and to be welcomed rather than feared?
