

# **Higher education, inequalities and a tetralemma: Reflections on depictions of neonationalism and the knowledge society**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we reflect on debates about the position of the university in contexts of widening intersectional inequalities, neonationalism and questions regarding the capacity of the knowledge society to adequately address the range of vulnerabilities associated with the Anthropocene. We review a role we proposed for universities after the 2008 financial crisis, considering that, as particularly located institutions with links across a range of systems, they could help resolve a tetralemma, which pulled in four different directions needing to reconcile aspirations for economic growth, equity, democracy and sustainability. Drawing on research conducted in the subsequent decades we show that HE systems and universities have not adequately taken the challenge of providing a space to address the different demands associated with the tetralemma. We consider some of the systemic and institutional changes needed for this to happen and propose three conditions of possibility for continuing the transnational and open idea of a university in hard times.

## **Keywords**

Global higher education; inequalities; tetralemma

## **Introduction**

Twelve years ago, we co-edited a book *Global inequalities and higher education* in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010). This was a period of great economic and political uncertainty, marked by debates about inequalities within and between countries with ramifications for how to think about higher education. In trying to characterise some of what we described as a ‘troubling nexus of problems’, we noted they presented not just a dilemma, but a tetralemma, pulling in four different directions, requiring that we hold together aspirations for economic growth, equity, democracy and sustainability (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010, 3). Interestingly, possibly as a reflection of the moment we were working on the volume, there was little consideration in our analysis of facets of nationalism or ways in which a national dynamic might position the tetralemma. In our introduction, we argued that global higher education, as a set of interconnected institutions, was uniquely well placed to serve the interests of redressing inequality and allowing for negotiation between the demands of the different poles of the

tetralemma. The two books under review in this symposium express some of the same analysis of the higher education sector, although they place the emphasis somewhat differently. In this article, we reflect critically on the arguments they make and sharply question our own previous analysis in the light of the experiences of the past decade.

Douglass (2021) and the authors in the welcome collection *Neonationalism and universities* see the key historical role of universities in nation-building distinguishing those acting as leaders of social and political change from those acting as followers, reproducing an existing or evolving political order (Douglass 2021, 34). This distinction, based on analysis of the way universities work, informs Douglass' analysis of how they might be impacted by neonationalism. He defines neonationalism as:

a term that describes the rise, and in some cases revival, of extreme right-wing movements in key areas of the world, often characterized by anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric; economic protectionism; constraints on civil liberties; attacks on critics, including journalists and academics; denial of science related to climate change and the environment; and the emergence and empowerment of demagogues and autocrats" (Douglass 2021, vii).

Neonationalism, thus, touches all four poles of the tetralemma we outlined, noting failures of economic growth, democracy, sustainability and equity. Across a range of settings in Europe, North and South America, and Asia, the chapters document how universities are being undermined by neonationalism. Douglass and colleagues see the emergence of a neonationalist threat to universities as part of the response to globalization and acknowledge their potential to address or reinforce social divisions (Douglass 2021, 35) with van der Wende's chapter on Europe arguing "many universities in Europe focused their attention on being globally competitive while at the same time often neglecting the consequences of globalization, including growing inequality and diversity in their local communities" (van der Wende 2021, 135). In terms of the tetralemma, this argument highlights how universities oriented themselves towards economic growth, and versions of liberal democracy, neglecting some of their connections with their own societies, and unhealed historical and social divisions. The analysis also points to a selective meaning given to equity.

The malleability of equity as a concept was a theme explored in our book. Unterhalter (2009, 2010) distinguished between three different ways in which equity could be understood, identifying equity from above legislated by states or regulated by institutions, equity from below, formulated through participatory processes of reflection and review, and equity from the middle enabling flows of money, skills or ideas. Considering the argument made by contributors to the Douglass collection, it appears to us that universities undertook a top-down, or possibly superficial engagement with equity from above displacing, or omitting to engage in, processes of thinking about equity from below, or through the middle. The implication of the analysis offered is that universities did not use their unique space to address with sufficient depth or orientation to action, the conditions that generate inequalities, although there are a number of explanations for this, linked to the actions of governments or markets, which condition the terrain on which universities operate. Universities, thus, did not contribute enough to contain neonationalism and processes which are now undermining them. The confidence we expressed that the higher education sector could help

negotiate the tetralemma is, in this analysis, not tenable, because of the failures of institutions and the higher education systems in which they operate to take on the challenge presented a decade ago.

A more confident reading of the resilient capacities of the higher education sector is presented by Frank and Meyer's *The University and the Global Knowledge Society* (2020). They consider the university as "the cultural base of a constructed global modern and especially hyper modern society, anchoring premises about the explicability of the universe and the capacity of persons to understand it" (Frank and Meyer 2020, 43). They see strong universities as part of a cultural system driving globalised isomorphic knowledge forms and relationships of production, circulation and consumption. They argue that the variations in national contexts only impact the organisational form of the university but do not affect "the cultural content of the institution in teaching and research" (2020, 39). Meyer, as a key exponent of new institutionalism in education, links the analysis of the university to key concerns, articulated in a wide range of work about the structuring of education organizations, particularly schools, to patterns of normative rationality throughout the world (Ramirez 2012; Jepperson and Meyer 2021; Schriewer 2021). In this volume Meyer and Frank (2020) depict a growing number of professionals and students participating in a shared, universalising, world society culture of rationality. Ideas about rationality, autonomy and empowered action are apprehended and expressed through academic knowledge. The capacity of universities to generate rationality, they imply, will be protective, against all ills, turning knowledge into action. In their argument, efficiency and the construction of knowledge are privileged over the idea of sharing it, while global and national inequalities and social stratification are not identified as significant problems. In this analysis it is the form of rationality and the capacity for professional knowledge to be exchanged that allows for reconciliation of the tetralemma. While our analysis (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010) expressed a wish this might happen, the chapters in our book noted many difficulties of realising this. In contrast, Meyer and Frank's discussion is confident, although sustained examples across a wide range of contexts are not provided.

The two volumes thus present a pessimistic and an optimistic reading of the capacity of universities to engage with the tetralemma. For the authors of *Neonationalism and universities* the critical, tolerant cultures of universities are under threat from forces of neonationalism. For the authors of *The university and the global knowledge society* the relationships generated by universities will provide the resources to navigate both the tetralemma and other unforeseen threats. In trying to assess these very different analyses, we build from work we have done over the past decade looking at higher education, inequality and national and international processes. Our discussion draws on reflections on the history of universities, some recent overviews of responses by the higher education sector to socio-economic problems, epidemics, conflicts and disasters, some issues that emerge from looking at the distribution of funding for universities, and some of the debate about higher education, public good and social contract.

### **History and a navigation of the present**

Histories of universities in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas (Carpentier 2019; Perkin 2006) draw out how these institutions, for many centuries the preserve of elites or those close to elites, have served both global/international/transnational forces and national or local projects. They have generated both critical and conformist ideas, supported both authoritarianism and conditions that challenge this. Universities, thus, may facilitate negotiating the tetralemma or skew it towards one

pole at the expense of another. Within the same institution some individuals, departments, or relationships with local communities might lean in one direction or another. What histories highlight is that there is nothing pre-given in relation to the university's institutional form, or the cultures of academic production and exchange, to support either the pessimistic or the optimistic reading. Historical conditions will always prompt particular developments. While institutionalizing certain practices and processes - for example about equal opportunities in student admission, peer review, challenging discrimination in appointments, calling out and not tolerating sexual and racial harassment and violence, attending to the health, including the mental health of staff and students, might steer a direction – these are not guarantees that these procedures will always be enacted in ways that distil values about democracy, equity or sustainability. Every generation and academic community will need to review and refine these in the light of national and international conditions.

Rigorous reviews of the literature on higher education and development outcomes (Unterhalter and Howell 2021), effects of the COVID pandemic (Unterhalter et al. 2021) and climate crisis (Nussey et al. 2022) underline how higher education may support enhanced processes for building democracy, sustainability and equity, taking account of some of the issues posed by the form of economic growth. Before COVID, learning from previous disasters or pandemics, be it HIV, floods or earthquakes, was not hardwired into the form of higher education institutions, even though the initiatives taken to protect or support students, staff and local communities carried much useful insight (Unterhalter et al. 2021).

These rigorous reviews highlight positive, negative or mixed outcomes of the work of universities in confronting local, national and global problems. Unterhalter and Howell (2021) distil these outcomes as associated with building graduate skill and knowledge, enhancing the knowledge and skill of whole populations, economic growth, contributing to poverty reduction and sustainability, developing equitable relationships, supporting technological and social innovation, strengthening and transforming institutions, supporting the delivery of basic education, and the development of a strong and engaged civil society. A detailed rigorous literature review across low- and middle-income countries (Howell, Unterhalter and Oketch 2020) showed some of these outcomes are evident both in authoritarian settings, such as that associated with neonationalism as described by Douglass (2021) and in the mainly liberal settings, such as those outlined by Frank and Meyer (2020). Thus the national or global political frame does not fully predetermine the work of the university, although it sets some conditions of possibility and the sustainability of particular outcomes. The political setting of the university does strongly matter, but it is not the only set of relationships that matter.

The capacity of particular universities to work towards outcomes that engage with resolution of the tensions associated with the tetralemma links with the ways in which aspects of the higher education system operates nationally and globally and how historical forces play out in local settings and particular conjunctures. The initial post World War 2 expansion of access to higher education in many countries occurred in the context of the development of welfare or development states, seeking to reduce some inequalities (Carpentier 2021; Piketty 2014; McCowan 2019) with a political settlement based on a notion of a national social contract, which could address elements of the tetralemma, although, in those decades, which could be characterised as a progressive era, rather than a Golden Age, legislation and discussion generally overlooked the importance of sustainability. A second massification of higher education in the 1990s took place under conditions of

neoliberalism, with a strong orientation to systemic market processes leading institutions to fall in to “the trap of a competition fetish” (Naidoo 2018, 606). Increasingly individualised discourses circulated about increasing earning power for graduates, the status and esteem of particular higher education institutions, and the success or failure of the knowledge economy in specific countries. These ideas did not map easily onto particular forms of state control, although they were generally encouraged by states oriented to linking economic growth to globalization and the glamour of neoliberalism. But this period was not a superhighway of growth for knowledge economies. Public funding constraints and increased marketisation, privatisation and a growing shift towards public/private substitution in funding did not necessarily increase the resources devoted to the higher education sector (Carpentier 2012). Instead they transformed and often intensified processes of unequal institutional differentiation characterised by differential access to resources and social stratification (Carpentier 2021) undermining discussions of universities and the public or common good (Carpentier and Courtois 2022; Marginson 2011; Marginson 2020). But there were very varied experiences with this. Writing about higher education and the public good, drawing on examples from universities in four African countries and the uneven relationships that have ensued, Unterhalter and Allais (2022) point out comparisons between and within countries allow for more nuance and depth to be built into conceptual framings and depictions of forms of enactment by individuals and institutions in particular contexts. Abstract orientations about public good, the tetralemma, neonationalism and global knowledge society may be very far from the reality of highly unequal, socially stratified and politically complex societies evident in 2022. These analyses indicate that availability of resources for higher education and the ways in which these are distributed have considerable resonance in thinking about how or whether these systems can or cannot work as a space we proposed to enhance participatory debate and reflection and hold together the four centrifugal forces of the tetralemma (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010). To do this, we argued in 2010, requires not only particular state policies, and political direction, but also higher education institutions “recognising problems of their past and present in order to contribute to ideas of justice for our future” (2010, 29). Have they been able to do this nationally or transnationally?

### **Ten years on: moment of despair or turning point?**

In reflecting on the aftermath of Covid-19, the past decade of wars in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, the enormity of the climate crisis, and the rise of xenophobic and racist neonationalism, with its stress on post truth and questioning of processes of academic discussion, we need to question whether the relatively hopeful reading of the higher education system we presented is still appropriate. Economic reform and inequity have not been addressed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Recovery has been unbalanced and fragile, linked with enormous inequalities within and between countries. Neoliberalism is now rampant, with very little serious and sustained attention given to addressing and ending the extensive harms associated with resource extraction, carbon emissions, and long running wars. Despite at least three pandemics since the 1990s, education systems that do not deliver quality schooling to the majority of children, the harsh consequences associated with how people have abused the planet, and high levels of poverty and violence, even in the richest economies, there is only piecemeal concern with these issues in higher education systems. Universities have supported the science that documents many of these processes but have not been visible enough in the social action that calls governments and large corporations to account.

Thus, universities have not really stepped up to the challenge although there have been experiences of small-scale initiatives. One of the huge disappointments was the way the higher education sector in many countries embraced neoliberalism and privatisation. The higher education sector has been slow to contribute to reduce inequalities in its own practices and even more so in connecting its work to initiatives that seek to bring about sustained change in the direction of equality, sustainability and democracy in the societies in which universities are located. The difficulties of universities holding the space for debate around the tetralemma are exacerbated by institutions that have only sporadically attended to their own engagements with the different poles of the tetralemma.

We propose a view alternative to the optimistic and pessimistic readings presented by these two volumes. While the form of state institutions and its relationship with higher education is of central importance, the way this plays out in particular universities may vary. There are accounts of pockets of critical practice associated with universities operating in autocratic political economies, as Unterhalter (2020) noted in reflections on higher education under apartheid in South Africa, as much as there are authoritarian and hierarchical institutions operating in liberal social democracies, which much of the scholarship and activism on decolonizing higher education has sought to highlight (Shahjahan et al. 2021; Stein 2019). But the politics of how they operate, why and with what consequences is highly salient. It is not only the shape of the university or the higher education system that will help reflection on the tetralemma but the conditions inside and outside universities that make for discussion and action on themes associated with the set of problems the tetralemma highlights. For example, what are the normative implications of full neoliberalism as opposed to revisiting a mixed economy? What actions follow from assessing this? Are we to oversee increased vulnerability of underrepresented groups or a real implementation of social solidarity? How do we prepare for future national and global crises in communities, institutions, states and transnationally? Do we take action on sustainability or turn away? As Covid has shown that we can adapt for our survival, drawing on both mistakes and lessons learned, how do we reboot national and global economies/societies to address the environmental crisis not at some future point, but now?

In reflecting on the shortcomings of our own initial analysis and the issues highlighted in these two volumes, we want to draw out three conditions of possibility for the transnational and open idea of a university in hard times. Firstly, there is a condition of publicness. Our initial thinking about the tetralemma and higher education stressed the public deliberation side of the vision of public good. Unterhalter and Allais (2022 forthcoming) distinguish between the instrumental and the intrinsic public good role of universities, noting that both are necessary. A transnational and open idea of a university must continue to facilitate these processes. But refinement, and attention to historical and contemporary injustices are needed. This entails close attention to the exchange of ideas, issues of access and participation, attention to the difference of location in dialogues and understanding of the judgements made with regard to quality, solidarity and social justice. Publicness is enmeshed with processes of power, which need critical examination and review. Not simple assertion.

Secondly there is a condition about organisational form. Particular organisational processes and connections are needed, and these have to be reviewed and evaluated so that we can connect institutions, individuals, systems and discourse to protect and advance human development better. UNESCO's attempt to imagine a new social contract for education suggests a particular organisational form and notes "Universities can make significant contributions to broadening the

knowledge commons and ensuring its inclusiveness and diversity” (2021, 75). This process requires inter university co-operation, better articulation with education systems and the societies they serve, and generating new ideas about the people and politics needed to realise this. It situates higher education as neither a leader nor a follower in grand political designs, or in service to particular forms of the state, but it asserts something about an organisational form that is distinctive amongst equals, a distinction that is earned and protected by institutional forms and the connected systems, because of what is valuable, which is always under review.

A third condition is an acknowledgement not of power, universality or rationality, but an acceptance of fragility, the vulnerability of humans and the institutions they have built, including higher education institutions, and the need for social solidarity normatively oriented around human rights, equalities, intersectionality and sustainability.

Higher education, in this new, more battered incarnation, is not so much the space to allow for a resolution of the tetralemma, but a place to describe its features, the effects of the Anthropocene, and shape some of the new dispositions and actions that can help sustain equity, democracy, sustainability and question economic growth. Universities are not isolated organisations undertaking this work, but are linked into particular forms of institutionalisation and system building. It remains an open question as to whether the higher education systems and institutions we have built and the people who work in and with them are equal to the challenge.

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