Academic Globalization: Where Did We Come from? Where Are We Going?

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Abstract
Almost all existing universities stem from the Western university model. This article discusses this tradition—how colonialism impacted the expansion of universities and the reasons why modern universities continue to use this pattern of academic development.

The Western concept of universities has been under growing attack from several fronts. Many countries have cut public subsidies for higher education in the past decade, reflecting general disaffection with universities for their failure to act as channels of social mobility and economic success. The scientific research mission of universities has also been challenged. During the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, a former secretary of education commented on the discredited status of universities, arguing that British society was tired of listening to academic experts. Authoritarian leaders in Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey have used their powers to restrict institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Lately, Western colonialism and related themes such as critical race theory have entered the debate about contemporary higher education reality. In a recent article on the globalization of higher education (University World News, May 15, 2021), Simon Marginson denounced the domination of Anglo-American science and the English language. Against this background, the article focuses on just one important aspect of the development of the modern universities—how "Western-model" universities were established in the Global South, mainly in the nineteenth century, and the convergent forces at play in creating a global model of university.

Colonialism and Christianity

Colonialism was, of course, the key driver of Western-model higher education development in the Global South. Christian missionary efforts also played an important role, and often, the two were linked. The colonizers had different approaches to higher education: The British were more active in permitting or sponsoring higher education in their colonies, the French less so, while the Portuguese eschewed academic development. The Spanish "outsourced" higher education to the Catholic Church and particularly to the Jesuits, with the dual goals of Christian conversion and colonial management. All colonizers recognized the need for a small Western-educated indigenous class to manage the colonies.

In India, the modest expansion of higher education under colonialism was largely due to Indian initiatives to build colleges to provide access to the civil service and growing commerce for an emerging Indian middle-class, and to Christian missionary efforts. The British authorities made few investments in higher education, and only after 1857 did they try to control emerging higher education. Unsurprisingly, the institutions that were created followed the English model and used English as the medium of instruction. The story in other colonial areas was similar. It is, of course, significant that all colonial universities used the language of the colonizer—and many continue to do so in the twenty-first century.

Many regions in the world had rich intellectual, religious, and higher education traditions before the advent of colonialism. The oldest universities in the world were in South Asia—in Taxila and Nalanda, predating European universities by many centuries. Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fes and Al-Azhar University in Cairo also predated the birth of the first European universities. But while the intellectual and religious traditions continued in South Asia and the Arab world, the traditional academic institutions did not thrive and were gradually eclipsed by Western model institutions in their respective countries.

Colonial higher education institutions used the languages of the colonists, since their purpose was mainly to train civil servants and other professionals to staff the colonial

government. Similarly, the curriculum was entirely imported from the metropole. It is probably an oversimplification, but at the same time accurate to summarize colonial attitudes toward indigenous cultures with the paternalistic and culturally dismissive words of colonial administrator Thomas Babbington Macaulay: "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia…"

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Interestingly, in the postcolonial era, no country has returned to precolonial higher education or has attempted to deviate fundamentally from the Western academic model imposed by the colonialist authorities.

Developments in Noncolonized Countries

Not every non-Western country was subject to colonial rule, and it is worth looking at higher education developments in noncolonized nations. Of particular interest are Japan and Thailand. When, in the nineteenth century, both countries were pressured by the Western-dominated globalization of the day, they felt the need to modernize society and education—and both chose to establish Western-style higher education institutions rather than rely on existing academic traditions. After the Meiji restoration in 1868, Japan searched for a university model that would serve a modernizing society, and, after careful examination of useful models, adopted German and American higher education ideas, ignoring centuries-old indigenous traditions. Similarly, when King Chulalongkorn looked to modernize higher education and society, in part to hold off possible colonial incursions, Western models were chosen, culminating in the establishment of Chulalongkorn University in 1917. In no case did noncolonized countries seeking to modernize higher education use an indigenous traditional academic model.

The Chinese experience is significant as well. As Rui Yang points out in his article "World Class Universities in China's Heroic Past" (*IHE* #107), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of Western Christian missionary institutions, as well as the Chinese government's own use of Western models, were influential in developing modern higher education in China—and proved successful. In addition, European colonial powers, mainly Germany and France, established universities in the parts of China that they directly controlled. Significantly, the powerful traditional Confucian educational model was not used to assist in China's modernization, except perhaps for the traditional civil service examination that evolved into the *gaokao*, which today is a major sorting mechanism to select and allocate students to universities.

Where Are We Going?

When countries in the Global South became independent in the second half of the twentieth century, they maintained and expanded the Western model of university introduced by the colonial authorities, perceived as an essential instrument for nation-building and human capital development. Notwithstanding a large variety of economic systems, political realities, stages of socioeconomic development, religious and cultural traditions, and other variations, almost every university in the twenty-first century broadly follows a Western model.

However, this model is being challenged today on grounds of elitism, insufficient attention to the Sustainable Development Goals, and the perceived colonialist nature of the curriculum. While some of the criticisms can be coopted by governments that are against autonomous universities committed to the dissemination of scientific evidence, a lot can certainly be done to make universities more inclusive, sustainable, and socially responsible. A growing number of institutions have started to reexamine their past with a critical eye, acknowledge their close association with ugly moments in their country's history, such as slavery, apartheid, or discrimination toward indigenous and other marginalized population groups, and ensure that their programs are more attuned to the experience of traditionally oppressed social groups.

At the same time, it is essential to safeguard the fundamental values of the Western model of university, dedicated to the search for truth based on scientific evidence and academic freedom. In a world full of grand challenges, no one has better captured the noble mission of universities as beacons of knowledge and wisdom than Alfred North Whitehead, the twentieth century philosopher and mathematician:

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"The tragedy of the world is that those who are imaginative have but slight experience, and those who are experienced have feeble imaginations. Fools act on imagination without experience. Pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of the university is to weld together imagination and experience."