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# Connection and Collaboration in Global Higher Education Research

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**Abstract**
The field of higher education has reached a moment of maturity, having moved from the fringes of other scholarly communities to becoming a well-established field in its own right. However, despite collectively "knowing" more than ever about higher education, in practical terms, higher education is in crisis in much of the world. Increased collaboration is required in order to overcome the collective inability of the field to translate research findings into policy and practical impact.

Given the proliferation of academic programs and research centers focused on higher education around the world, it is easy to forget that the scholarly analysis of higher education is a relatively new endeavor. The entire history of the higher education research community has occurred in the last sixty or so years, and, for much of that time, only a small number of researchers, based on a small number of countries, formed part of that community. However, as higher education itself has expanded rapidly across the globe, so has the field, and today, there is a robust international research community, comprising both researchers who focus on local/domestic questions related to higher education and those focused more on its international dimensions. There is much promise in this development. Not only is more now collectively "known" about higher education, but the knowledge being created is now coming from a more diverse group of researchers, based all around the world and in a variety of institutional contexts. As a result, there is great potential for intellectual diversity, which—in turn—offers new insights that can be brought to bear on both new and entrenched challenges facing the sector. One could, therefore, say that the field of higher education—and, within that, the subfield of international higher education—has now reached a moment of maturity, having moved from the fringes of other scholarly communities to assume the role of a well-established field in its own right.

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### A Mature Field with Limited Impact
However, despite collectively "knowing" more than ever about higher education, in practical terms, higher education is in crisis in much of the world. Public perception of the value of higher education is plummeting in many contexts. In many fully massified systems, young people are increasingly questioning the importance of obtaining a university degree for their future employment prospects, while political figures with more populist platforms frequently deride higher education for being an elite institution, out of touch with the mainstream. Conservative critiques of the apparent progressivism of higher education are also increasingly common throughout the world. Those who study

higher education know that many of the critiques being levied against higher education are not supported by evidence, but their increasing prominence and importance demonstrate the collective inability of the field to translate research findings into policy and practical impact.

## Barriers to Impact
There are myriad reasons for this lack of alignment between research output and impact. Most importantly, higher education researchers face multiple priorities, which limit their ability to devote time to the translation of research into policy and practice. Those with academic contracts must prioritize publication in peer-reviewed journals over more impactful practices, such as assuming advisory roles or publishing in the mainstream media. Those interested in the analysis of higher education from other academic disciplines have additional publication pressure, as they must publish in their home field as well as publishing in the higher education literature. Many also have significant teaching and service responsibilities, which are crucial to the practice of higher education but also limit the time that can be dedicated to more public-facing roles.

Incentive structures also work against the development of new perspectives within the field, which significantly limits the potential inherent in the field's expansion around the world. The existing concepts and theories used in higher education research must evolve and change as the sector changes and as they are applied and tested within a broad range of contexts, and—when necessary—new theories and concepts should be developed to take their place. However, this does not often happen, largely because incentive structures do not generally prioritize conceptual work. Those individuals most likely to offer new perspectives on entrenched concepts and theories—namely, those based in the Global South, where the study of higher education is relatively new—are also the least likely to have the time or the resources to engage in more time-intensive scholarship, including the development of new theory, given the extensive teaching and service expectations that tend to fall on faculty in rapidly massifying systems.

There are also significant barriers that reduce the visibility of newer perspectives that are generated. Those who work in any language other than English struggle to reach an international audience, given that all major journals in the field publish in English. Technology also often plays a detrimental role, despite its democratic promise. The algorithms built into search engines funnel researchers towards the most cited sources, while those fueling social media platforms create academic echo chambers, which make it even more difficult for policy makers and practitioners to identify and engage with work being produced outside their preexisting networks. Artificial intelligence is likely to further exacerbate this myopia in research and further limit the range of perspectives available to policy makers, given that large language models work off databases of previously published information.

## The Need for Collaboration
The contemporary backlash against higher education could be a needed clarion call for the international higher education research community. There is great potential in the fact that more is known about higher education—including both its potential benefits and its significant failures—than at any other moment in history. However, the opportunity is squandered if that knowledge is largely invisible beyond the confines of academic echo chambers. What is lacking is connection—between contexts, between individual researchers, between data sets, and between ways of knowing and understanding—and translation, between languages but also from academic discourse into accessible prose. The challenge is that the spaces which could be used to foster connection and collaboration—namely, conferences, academic journals and research centers—also often serve to perpetuate many of the challenges already outlined, rather than leveraging their positions of power to address them.

Research centers and associations that organize convening spaces for the field, therefore, have an important role to play in addressing the current impasse, as they could do much more to bring individual bodies of knowledge about higher education together, and to create links between the higher education research community and those working in policy and practice. Academic journals, publishers, and other "producers" of

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knowledge could also do much more to privilege intellectual diversity and to prioritize the open dissemination of knowledge. Responsibility also lies with the institutions that govern academic workload, as more could be done to encourage researchers to prioritize the fostering of connections, both within and beyond the field. At the same time, practitioners and policy makers could do more to actively engage with new strands of research, including from other geographic contexts. Although all of these things are extremely challenging to implement, especially for less established institutions and less globally powerful contexts, they are not impossible, and the potential payoff is great. Indeed, unless such substantial efforts are attempted, the most likely scenario is that the promise inherent in the now fully mature global higher education field will not be met, and the crises facing the sector will continue, to our collective detriment. ◢