

The Skewed Global Landscape of Higher Education Training and Research

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Higher education systems and institutions across the globe increasingly require more and better information, on which to base sound decisions and meaningful strategic planning. To operate efficiently, effectively, and creatively in contexts of uncertainty and change, the higher education sector worldwide also needs a growing corps of academic and administrative staff, with training and education specifically in this field. The need for deeper understanding of the higher education enterprise, beyond personal experience in academia, is crucial for the current (and rising) generation of institutional leaders, managers, and policymakers.

The needs in these areas raise important questions about where research and analysis of—as well as training for careers in—higher education take place. What do we know about the global landscape of research centers and academic programs offering graduate-level degrees in the study of higher education? And, in light of what we know about the size and shape of this research and training community, is there room for optimism or pessimism when it comes to meeting the tremendous need for information and talent development?

A “GROWTH INDUSTRY”

Since 2000, the Boston College Center for International Higher Education has produced three global inventories of higher education research centers/institutes and academic programs, focused on the study of higher education. In each instance, the numbers of centers and programs identified have expanded notably. For example, when compared to the 2006 iteration of the inventory, 293 more centers and programs were found in the 2013/2014 data collection exercise; and 26 more countries were found to host centers and programs, than in 2006. And while these findings may point to more energetic data collection efforts, there are clear signs that the higher numbers are reflective of real (and dramatic) growth.

Many of the research centers (100 of the 217) have been established since the year 2000, with significant expansion seen in Europe and Asia. China stands out as a particularly active developer of higher education research centers in re-

cent years—despite being underrepresented for a number of reasons in the most recent Boston College inventory exercise, the data still show that 20 new research centers/institutes have been established in China from 2000 to 2012.

Similarly, the Center for International Higher Education inventory has determined that at least 60 of the identified degree-granting programs in higher education worldwide were launched since 2000, and 33 of these have been established even more recently, since 2006.

EXPANSION WITHOUT EQUITY

The robust growth in the number of centers and programs, focused on higher education research and training, makes sense in light of the importance of the field in national and international policy spheres. It also clearly reflects the rising need for deeper understanding of the many complex processes unfolding (or actively being undertaken) at institutional and systemic levels. An apparent commitment—through the establishment of research centers/institutes and programs—to expand research activities and develop human resource capacity is a reason for celebration among those concerned with the many issues facing the academic enterprise the world over. At the same time, when viewed from the perspective of specific national needs and resources, there is cause for concern.

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The global population of higher education research centers/institutes and programs is highly concentrated in just a small number of countries. Indeed, nearly 44 percent of centers/institutes are located in just two countries (the United States and China). If we add in the next five countries hosting the largest numbers of centers (the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Canada, and Australia), these nations together host just over 66 percent of the global total of such centers. Overall, Latin America and Africa are home to just 3 percent each of identified higher education research centers, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) a mere 2 percent.

The situation is even more skewed for academic programs focused on producing graduate degree holders in

the field of higher education. Although the United States is admittedly overrepresented in the inventory and China is underrepresented, together these two countries are home to 81 percent of the 277 identified academic programs in the field. Only 6 programs across the whole of Africa were identified, 3 in all of Latin America, and just 1 in the Middle East and North Africa region.

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NEEDED: MORE INFORMATION AND URGENT SUPPORT FOR THE UNDERRESOURCED

Mapping the global landscape of capacity for, and attention devoted to, research and training in the field of higher education is surprisingly complex work. Gathering the necessary data to document where these efforts are being undertaken and, perhaps more importantly, the specific content and quality of these activities, are detailed and labor-intensive work. It also requires a good understanding of many diverse national contexts, in order to accurately reflect the scope and impact of the research and educational efforts underway in particular countries.

In China, for example, a significant number of programs and centers operating at a very local level were not included in our inventory. It would be useful if qualified China experts undertook a detailed examination of the higher education research and training sector there and produced a more detailed picture of how this work is unfolding in the Chinese context. The range of centers and programs is clearly immense, but much remains unclear, and undocumented, about the scope of activity and the impact of the large number of higher education centers and programs in China.

At a more global level, while the quantitative picture produced by an inventory exercise is important and illuminating, many fundamental questions remain. For example, what are the specific focus areas of these centers and degree-granting programs? What kinds of analysis are produced by the centers, how is this information disseminated and used, and what impact does it have? In what ways are the academic (degree-granting) programs exerting an influence on the health and performance of institutions and national systems?

Most urgent of all, of course, is the recognition that the patterns of privilege and wealth that categorize so many other social, political, and economic dynamics around the world are also in evidence when it comes to research and training in the field of higher education. If the sheer number of centers and programs is any indication, a small subset of the world's wealthiest countries and regions clearly occupies a position of significant privilege in regard to access to higher education research, analysis, and trained human capital; and all of the benefits that flow from such access. It is particularly striking, and disturbing, that large (and expanding) higher education systems—such as those of Brazil, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nigeria—have comparatively miniscule homegrown research and training apparatuses upon which to draw, as these countries move to address many complex and evolving challenges.

With awareness comes responsibility. As higher education research centers and academic programs around the world mature into their roles and expand their understanding of their place in a wider global network of similar entities, supporting and engaging with one another, and particularly under-resourced colleagues around the world deserves increasing attention.

Note: For more information on the current edition of the global inventory referenced in this article please see Laura E. Rumbley, et al. (2014). *Higher Education: A Worldwide Inventory of Research Centers, Academic Programs, and Journals and Publications* (3rd Edition). Bonn and New York: Lemmens Media. The publication is available as an e-book on Amazon.com, or as an abridged version available in both digital and hard copy formats directly from Lemmens Media (info@lemmens.de). ■



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