

Reviewing the role of universities in a post-development world

Scholars began writing about post-development theory in the 1980s. Post-development is a school of thought that is critical of development. It promotes alternative ways of thinking and acting beyond the ideology of development which originated during the Cold War.

According to post-development theorising, the idea of underdevelopment was conceptualised in order to promise material improvement to the global South in an attempt to slow the speed at which socialism was spreading by fast-tracking capitalist economic growth.

In order to explore models of university development, on Wednesday 26 June 2019, the University of the Free State's (UFS) South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) in Higher Education and Human Development Research Group hosted Professor Tristan McCowan, Deputy-Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education at University College London, for a seminar on the Bloemfontein Campus.

Development is not uniform

"A developmental university's primary orientation is serving society, particularly the marginalised of the community," the professor explained. Referencing developmental universities established in Africa in the post-independence period, Prof McCowan pointed out that these aimed to develop courses relevant to local agricultural and infrastructure needs. In addition, these institutions conducted applied research with the community, and maintained close relationships with government.



Professor Tristan McCowan, Deputy-Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education at University College London

Prof McCowan attested to the flawed nature of the race towards a universal form of development and continuing economic growth. "We need to emancipate ourselves from any notion that countries should all be developing in this same way."

He argued that competition in economic and higher education generates inequalities, hence the autonomous development advocated by post-development. This, he claimed, is a promising alternative model of a university which is concerned with achieving but also going beyond the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It appears utopian but asks that we imagine alternatives possibilities.

Moreover: "The acknowledgement of higher education in the Sustainable Development Goals has raised crucial questions about whether and how universities can solve environmental challenges, address societies' wicked problems and promote social justice," stated Prof McCowan.

Ecology of knowledges

He considers the post-development university as one that represents an 'ecology of knowledges', with students engaging with indigenous as well as mainstream forms of knowing, challenging disciplinary boundaries. These ways of adapting existing theories to practical problems of the outside world are reflected in the UFS' Integrated Transformation Plan.

If transformation is to be advanced in a radical direction as post-development argues, a critical questioning of the current educational landscapes needs to happen. This questioning is welcomed and encouraged at a post-development university.

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