

## The Impact of Globalisation on Higher Education: A Marxist Critique

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**ABSTRACT** Globalisation has for long been hailed as a process that brings with it immense benefits to society, social development and social systems. The globalisation process is largely credited for helping to create diversified and flexible learning systems as well as improved quality in communication systems that lead to greater efficiency in the delivery of Higher Education (HE). This view depicts globalisation as a process that is largely benevolent to society. However, this view has earned damaging criticism from Marxist scholars who among other things argue that globalisation tends to transform the higher educational system from a public service to a commercial commodity that is sold for profit with the ultimate result that students from lower social classes would not afford it. The critical issue is that globalisation imposes values and ethos in the HE system that lead to increased educational inequality and social disharmony. This conceptual paper adopts a Marxist theoretical approach to reflect and analyse the impact of globalisation on higher education (HE) practices and processes. It specifically explores how issues of access, equity, funding and national culture are constrained by forces of globalisation. It is based on a study of local and international literature on globalization. The paper also argues that values contained in the global HE system tend to neglect the rich cultures of developing societies and hence university leaders and governments are cautioned not to embrace globalisation uncritically.

### INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is a process that has permeated and affected all areas of human life such as the economic, political, cultural, technological and social (Chinnammai 2005). While globalisation can be conceptualized in terms of the re-configurations of the economy, the political domain, communication and cultural forms, (Burbules and Torres 2000; Castells 2000) it is most popularly associated with the economy. This argument has therefore given credence to the view that the economic factor is often regarded as the main driver of globalisation.

Globalisation has been central to the massive expansion experienced by the education system worldwide particularly at the higher education level. As Varghese (2009) observes, the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide more than doubled from 68 to 137.9 million students in the period 1991 to 2005. As the World Bank (WB) (2009) aptly puts it, in the context of globalization, an expanded higher education system is considered important in promoting faster technological catch-up and in improving a country's ability to maximize economic output. The globalization process has seen many developing economies getting increasingly integrated into the glo-

bal production process. As a result, social institutions such as the education system get re-oriented so as to address not only national requirements but also those of the global labour market. Re-orienting the HE education systems has been clearly evident in such countries as Malaysia, China, Indonesia, Republic of Korea and many African countries (Stromquist 2005). This re-orientation has manifested itself in many ways ranging from massive expansion of the HE system, changing of university curricula, diversification of the providers of the HE. All these efforts were meant to meet the skill requirements of the global market.

Globalisation has drawn attention to itself on account of its far-reaching consequences on social and economic development in general and social institutions such as universities in particular. While globalisation is regarded by some as an invaluable and inevitable process that lead to development, skeptics regard it as a polemical process that results in increasing social inequality and disharmony in society. Critics subscribing to the Marxist school of thought regard it as a modern version of cultural imperialism that can lead to the displacement of indigenous societies and replacing them with Western-type societies (Apple 2010; Bernado 2001). In this paper, the researcher intends to contribute to

this debate by using the Marxist perspective to explore the impact of the globalization process on the higher education systems of developing countries.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main goal of this study is to stimulate an intellectual conversation on the impact of globalization on higher educational institutions particularly universities. Using the Marxist perspective as a theoretical frame of reference, the paper seeks to underline the unintended consequences of the process of globalization that have far reaching impact on social life. This, it is hoped, will contribute in raising social consciousness particularly among developing societies of the world.

### **Reconnaissance of the Concept of Globalisation**

There are as many definitions of globalisations as there are writers in the field. Chinnammai (2005) conceives globalisation as a widening, deepening, and speeding up of interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary life, from cultural, to the economic, the social, the political and the spiritual. One World (2012) asserts that the hallmark of globalisation is the spread and integration of people, goods, finance, knowledge, communications and culture across the planet.

At the personal level, globalisation is often depicted as a positive benevolent process that creates space for personal fulfillment as well as stimulating wealth and encouraging cross-cultural experience (Lunn 2008). At the national level, globalisation is accredited for having created economic opportunities that led to the success in the reduction of poverty in such countries as China, Vietnam and Brazil (One World 2012).

Stromquist (2005) underlines the technological and the economic components of globalisation in her analysis. The technological component is largely responsible for the wide, deep and fast interconnectedness among people and countries (World Economic Forum 2013). This has led to the increased dissemination of information and dialogue. This has been made possible largely through technologies such as internet, computers, DVDs, satellite televisions and

cell phones as well as audio and videoconferencing innovations. The use of such communication technologies has made the world more interactive as communications and transactions can emerge between people who may never meet. In this way, globalisation is credited for contributing to the development of the network society (Stromquist 2005). The advances in technology have been instrumental in part to the development of market-led decision-making strategies, commonly referred to as neoliberalism (Barnett 1995). One key feature of the market-led ideology that is encapsulated in the process of globalisation is the thrust towards free trade and the removal of the state from productive activities so as to stimulate greater economic growth. The neo-liberal perspective, which is central to economic globalisation, has it that state action is not only unnecessary but also harmful since economic progress depends on individual effort and individual solutions (Lemmer 2001). Globalisation has thus led to the liberalisation of the world's economy with the concomitant effect that products have flooded the global market. As Burbules and Torres (2000) put it, globalisation is characterized by the emergence of new global cultural forms, media, and technologies of communication, which shape the relations of affiliation, identity and interaction within and across local cultural settings.

### **Economic Globalisation**

The economic factor is often construed as the main driver of globalisation. This gives rise to the "economic primacy" model of globalisation. In terms of this perspective, the global economy assumes the status of the capitalist global economy that is organised on the basis of market principles and production for profit. Economic globalisation is facilitated by the activities of multinational corporations. As Burbules and Torres (2000:7) observe, the contemporary global economic interaction has assumed a historically unprecedented scale and size with global production by multi-national corporations controlling about 25% of the world's economy and 80% of the world's trade. This process has been enhanced by the globalised migration of labour as national economies get deeply enmeshed in global systems of production and exchange that lead to an international division of labour and economic integration which is marked by new exchange relations and arrangements.

A key integral part of the global economy are regulatory international financial institutions such as the Breton Woods Institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (Holton 1998; Delanty 2001; Lemmer 2001; Burbules and Torres 2000). The establishment of these institutions, has created a broader regulatory framework within which all economic networks take place. Webster (1990) refers to the IMF and the World Bank as key global institutions that are largely responsible for the imposition of neo-liberal and market models on developing nation states and governments. Consequently, as global competition increases, governments become increasingly unable to maintain existing levels of social protection or welfare state programmes.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Globalisation**

Globalisation is rooted in the theory of modernisation, which Romm (1990:5) observes as entailing "... a total transformation of a traditional society into the types of technology and associated social organization that characterize the advanced economically prosperous nations of the western world." From this definition, the assumption that all societies can be classified as either modern or traditional clearly comes to the fore. According to modernisation theory, a traditional society is characterized by irrationality, fatalistic attitudes and ascribed values while a modern society is considered to be rational, forward-looking, competitive and achievement oriented (Webster 1990).

A key assumption of the theory of modernisation is that western societies are more developed than third world societies and given the right prescription, the third world countries will eventually develop so as to appear like those of the west. From this assumption arose the view that there is only one path of development (from traditional to modern) which a society can follow. Modernisation has its theoretical basis in functionalism and is clearly implied in the work of such theorists like Durkheim, Spencer and Parsons (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). These classical theorists had a conception of unilinear development because their arguments were premised on the idea that human societies moved from a stage of simple societies in the direction of more complex societies (van der Merwe 1990).

Globalisation is considered as a central element of the modernisation process that is mainly responsible for the transference and diffusion of modernizing western values, knowledge and technologies to developing countries. In terms of this argument, universities as knowledge institutions play a critical role in the diffusion of innovation process.

### **The Positive Impact of Globalisation on Higher Education**

At the outset, it is important to point out that the universities as part of society cannot immune themselves against the global forces that prevail in society. While the effect of globalisation on HE remains polemic, advocates of globalization argue that due to technological globalisation, world nations have become highly interconnected to the extent of becoming a boundary-less global village. This has the critical implication that universities will cease to operate as isolated institutions in particular cities, or countries but rather as global higher education institutions connected to the global world that transcend their countries of origin (Meyer et al. 2011).

As Yang (2004) succinctly puts it, the rise of a global society, driven by technology and communication developments is shaping students into global citizens with a broad range of skills to apply to a competitive, information-based society. This is important as the future of countries is often believed to depend on their abilities to compete in a global market where industrial-based economies are giving way to knowledge based industries (Chinnammai 2005). The advent of global technology and communication systems has helped education become a lifelong and training process that develops transferable skills and knowledge that can be applied to competitive markets (Barnett 2005).

It is critical to point out that the boundary-less knowledge economy has made it possible for universities to collaborate easily with other universities across the globe. As Yang (2004) amply demonstrates, globalization enhances and strengthens the process of visiting academics from overseas universities as well as research collaborations among world academics. In the context of South Africa, such a development acts as an enabler for local universities to compete with the leading universities globally (Yang

2004). Stanz (2010) cites global research collaborations that are conducted by leading research universities such as the University of Cape Town and the University of Witwatersrand as typical examples of the upshot of globalization on universities in South Africa. He further adds that globalisation has enhanced the exchange programmes of students and staff in a number of universities in the African continent.

Globalisation has two critical implications in terms of staffing and student enrolment in universities (Chinnamai 2005). First, it means that universities are now well positioned to attract, recruit and enroll staff and students respectively not only from the national boundaries but also internationally. This among other things is important as it helps foster a global citizen mindset (Barnett 1992) as well as democratizing higher education.

Globalization has had a significant impact on global distance education. The University of South Africa (UNISA), a leading institution in distance higher education in South Africa, has benefited immensely from globalisation as it is now able to enroll, teach and assess students across the globe through information technology systems (Lemmer 2001). The Zimbabwe Open University, in Zimbabwe, has also benefitted significantly from the opportunities created by globalisation since it is now able to attract students across the African region and beyond (Zvobgo 1998). As Burbules and Torres (2000) highlight, globalisation of distance higher education has increased access to higher education and also led to a more diverse student clientele and the development of a global educational curriculum. In terms of Varghese's (2009) view, such a global curriculum shows an increasing shift in emphasis in university study programmes from traditional subject areas to engineering, management and IT-related disciplines. The use of advanced information and technology systems helps to make the delivery of these and other programmes and learning materials easy. At the same time students are able to develop papers, assignments and projects in electronic form particularly through the aid of on-line digital libraries that have been made available through globalisation (Osorio et al. 2013).

The technological changes that have been catapulted by globalisation have seen universities adopting flexible delivery systems and thereby helping to break the barriers that have char-

acterized the delivery of education in many universities particularly those relying on the distance mode of delivery. As Delanty (2001) observes, in the global era, knowledge gets depersonalized, deterritorialized and globalised. By this it is meant that knowledge is being taken out of its traditional context and disseminated by new media of communication. To this end, Friese and Wegner in Delanty (2001: 115) insightfully articulate, that "... in the global age, the scholar's space is opening beyond the traditional spaces of the library, the seminar room, and the study into a virtual level. In many post-independent states of Africa, globalisation has been of particular significance to the increase in student mobility, the rapid diffusion of knowledge, internationalisation of the curriculum and international research cooperation and exchange programmes (Burbules and Torres 2000).

### **The Negative Impact of Globalization on HE**

From a Marxist standpoint, the view that globalisation acts as a catalyst for social and economic development has severe limitations since nations do not necessarily enter the globalisation process on equal footing and thus do not benefit equally from the process. Marxist thinkers such as Apple (2010) challenge the uncritical acceptance of globalisation as a positive force for society in general and higher education in particular.

Since this section of the analysis is informed by the Marxist perspective, it is vital that the researcher gives an exposition of the Marxist view of education and its relationship with the capitalist economy first and foremost.

### **HE and its Relationship with the Capitalist Economy: A Marxist View**

Central to the Marxist view of education is the idea that the education system cannot be understood independently of the main economic relations of the society of which it is a part (White 2000; Varghese 2009). To Marxists, society is structured into two main parts namely the economic infrastructure or base and the superstructure. The base comprises forces and social relations of production while the superstructure comprises social institutions such as the education system, the family and the religious system (Apple 2010; Machingambi 2008). The economic



infrastructure/base forms the foundation on which the superstructure rests and thus sets the broad limits with regard to the nature and dynamic of the superstructure (Bowles and Gintis 1976). This means that economic factors in the society shape, influence and determine the operation of the superstructure including the education system. In short, Marxists believe that there is direct linkage between the capitalist economy and the educational system. This linkage operates in such a way that the economic system conditions, shapes influences and determines the functioning of the educational system while the latter reinforces and perpetuates the economic system. This process is facilitated in part by mechanisms such as liberal policies, the commodification of education and its subordination to market ethics and practices. Marxists claim that under capitalist conditions, the education sector is tightly controlled in the interests of capital, accumulation and the profit motive (Apple 2010). Ultimately this has the implication that under a global capitalist economy, the education system gets embedded in class relations and reflects, reinforces and replicates the tendency of capital to produce and reproduce inequality.

### **Unraveling the Impact of Globalisation on HE: A Marxist Perspective**

Deploying the Marxist view to an understanding of the impact of globalisation on HE, it is important to note that Marxists such as Gunter Frank (2000) and Bultana (2007) regard globalisation as an aspect of advanced capitalism that is characterized by the emergence of a world system that is driven in large part by the global capitalist economy. This argument has it that the forces of globalisation originate in the developed Western capitalist countries and are spread to lesser developed countries under the premise that this will stimulate development in developing countries. In terms of this argument, developed capitalist countries like Britain and America should facilitate in the development of the other countries through massive transfer of technology, ideas and values (Bernado 2001). It is in this sense that Western-type higher education is depicted as an emblem of modernity and development (Chinnammai 2005). Such a view is informed by the often-taken for granted assumption that development is simply a matter of hav-

ing less developed countries emulating and adopting the models of development that have been found useful elsewhere. Adopting this argument implies that in the context of globalisation, Western models of HE need to be diffused to less developed countries so that they too can catch-up and modernise.

The aforementioned view, which is at the core of the modernisation theory, fails to consider any possible repercussions of foreign models of higher education on the pattern of life of the intended beneficiaries. The critical issue here, as observed by Varghese (2009) in respect of sub-Saharan Africa is that a global higher education system, is not necessarily based on felt needs from within and may therefore be very unsuitable to the economic, political, social and cultural set up of low-income countries. Apple (2010) argues that such an education system may not necessarily promote the interests of historically excluded social, ethnic and minority groups. Rao (2010) also argues that the values of a global HE system are inconsistent with the ideals of equity of opportunities and access since it leads to ever-increasing inequalities among individuals and social groups in terms of their ability to participate in HE.

In the context of globalisation, Marxists such as Pierre Bourdieu regard the West, as a dominant block, that enjoys a hegemonic position in the world as a whole (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Strydom 2000; Bourdieu 2005). Proponents of this view regard globalization as a new form of imperialism. From a Marxist perspective, the globalisation process has grave consequences with regards of the functioning and outcomes of higher education particularly in less developed countries (Bourdieu 2005). To the Marxists, the spread of HE under a global environment is not unproblematic since it is a process that is influenced by the crave for power and domination of less developed nations by the advanced capitalist nations (Delanty 2001; Bultana 2007; Machingambi 2008).

Apple (2000) insightfully argues that in a globalised higher education environment, universities tend to adopt the values of the corporate culture of industry and thus predisposing them to operate in terms of prevailing market principles and profit motive. This, among other things, implies that universities are forced to compete for status and excellence in order to stand out among their peers so as to attract both capital

and human resources (Rao 2010). The fact that in the context of globalisation university operations are driven by markets gives entrepreneurial values a new legitimacy in university business. This gives rise to the phenomenon of commodification and mercantilisation of knowledge (Varghese 2009). This means that knowledge is treated like any other commercial commodity that is sold on the market to those who are willing to pay a higher price for it. In this way higher education under globalisation acts as an instrument of stratifying students on the basis of social class.

Globalisation has crucial implications in terms of the status, purpose, structure and the content that universities offer (Burbules and Torres 2000). For instance, certain forms of knowledge may be accorded more status than others on the basis of its perceived economic usefulness and its technological value (Yang 2004; Stanz 2010). It is therefore not surprising that market-related knowledge disciplines such as techno-sciences and business tend to be given more privilege than others such as social sciences and humanities. As Greaves et al. (2007) perceptibly observe, in a global capitalist society, education acquires a particular, distinctive economic and business orientation which does not necessarily provide a holistic educational experience that enriches the learner. Thus, disciplines or forms of knowledge that help develop national culture or other forms of cultural heritage may be marginalized as the focus will be on those learning areas that tend to promote cosmopolitan values.

Bourdieu (2005) believes that this is one way in which indigenous people lose their vernacular knowledge and thus their cultural worth. It is because of this that in the era of globalisation, HE is often considered less equipped to respond to the social, cultural, legal and political challenges of the developing nations. This gives credence to the view that globalisation acts as an instrument for the spread of Western hegemony in higher education systems particularly in developing countries (Lewin 1997).

The critical question that comes to the fore here is that if globalisation forces universities to reconstruct themselves as commercial enterprises competing in the knowledge business, how will people from lower social classes benefit? This provokes the debate on the capacity of higher education to act as an instrument of so-

cial, economic and political emancipation. This situation becomes even more problematic given the fact that globalisation opens space for private organizations to participate in the provision of higher education while the national State gradually sheds its role as a major funder of the education for the masses.

In terms of Marxist thinking, a higher education system that operates on market principles is incompatible with the interests of the ordinary citizens, particularly the poor. Clearly, the fact that globalisation transforms the status of HE from being a social service to an economic commodity that can be purchased on the market serves as a clear testimony that such an education system furthers the interests of capital more than those of the working class.

The implication of the diminishing role of the state in funding HE is that vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups in society such as the orphans and the poor, get excluded from participation in higher education. As the burden of financing HE gets shifted from the state to the shoulders of individual parents and students on a users-pay basis (Chinnammai 2005) HE gradually gets out of reach of many students from lower social class backgrounds. In post-independent African States, the critical question then is, "How will the issue of equity, equality and redress in educational provision and participation be guaranteed in a globalised HE environment?" As Rao (2010) succinctly observes, the concerns and processes of globalisation highlight the ever-increasing inequalities among individual and groups in terms of their ability to access HE system. This is probably the main reason why Lauer (1996) refers to education in capitalist societies as a social problem. In the light of the foregoing, it becomes apparently clear that in macro-political terms, globalisation, as a capitalist phenomenon, does indeed lead to increasing educational inequality and social strife. Suffice to say that a higher education system that is based on market principles serve to reinforce and reproduce the class system in society.

Under globalisation, the privatization of HE is amplified by the role played by global regulatory financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (the Breton Woods system). These financial institutions impose Structural Adjust-

ment Programmes (SAPs) as a condition for the receipt of loans by debt-ridden developing countries particularly in Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (Varghese 2009). The macro-economic thinking on which SAPs are based, is that economic growth, driven by private sector foreign investment is the key to development. This is achieved in part by among other things eliminating trade and investment regulations, imposing changes to a country's public policies including abandonment of protectionist and regulatory controls, promoting exports and reduction in government funding of social programmes such as higher education (Castells 2000). Brett, in Holton (1998) aptly argues that IMF conditions undermine the efforts of countries that wish to attempt redistributive social policies involving state intervention. This is truly so given the fact that a market-driven HE system seems to pay little or no attention to issues of equality and equity of opportunity in the provision of HE.

When applied to the education system this neo-liberal approach implies that universities and other academic institutions must operate on the basis of economic rationality (Delanty 2001; Barnett 1995). This among other things means that efficiency and an ethic of cost-benefit analysis should be the dominant norm driving the educational system.

A market-driven HE system is inconsistent with the aspirations and equity agendas of many post independent African States such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Botswana where prior to independence, education has previously been a privilege of a selected few (Dhunpath and Vithal 2013; Connell et al. 2006). These countries have attempted to make education more equitable and accessible to lower social class people by making huge subsidies to public education. This has been clearly evidenced by the fact that since independence, education has constituted the biggest single item of recurrent expenditure in national budgets in respect of many post independent states of Southern Africa (Zvobgo 1998; Machingambi 2008). Clearly, the application of neo-liberal policies under globalisation into HE seems to conflict with the major educational policy objectives that many African governments have set and pledged to achieve.

### CONCLUSION

The arguments in this paper have shown that globalisation is a profound process that has

fundamentally altered the terrain of higher educational institutions in terms of their practices and educational policies. This paper has also strongly argued that the advent of globalisation has prompted a reconfiguration of HE systems to make them more relevant to the needs of the global economy. The author has argued that HE systems are highly indebted to the globalisation process especially when one reflects on the invaluable role of the World Wide Web (WWW) commonly known as the internet and its attendant forms of advanced Information Technology and Communication systems that have not only enhanced but transformed the pedagogic practices in higher educational institutions into formidable forces to reckon with.

Nevertheless, critics contend that in the context of globalisation, HE systems become sites for competition and contestation for access, equality and equity of opportunity particularly given the fact that globalisation opens new opportunities for private corporations to participate in the provision of HE at competitive costs.

Marxists believe that such an education system tends to promote the interest of capital at the expense of the needs of the ordinary citizens. This makes higher education a social problem since many students from lower social class backgrounds will not be able to use it as an instrument for social ascent. Globalisation is therefore inconsistent with the ideals of maximizing social access and equity in education systems particularly in developing nations.

It can therefore be concluded that while universities cannot insulate themselves against the potent influence of globalization, they should not be overwhelmed by that process to the extent of undermining their local imperatives, culture and priorities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the foregoing discussion the following recommendations are made:

- (a) Globalisation, while obviously beneficial, must not be perceived as the panacea to world developmental problems particularly with developing economies.
- (b) While universities in the developing world cannot insulate or extricate themselves from global forces, they should resist being overwhelmed by it to the extent of undermining their local cultures and value systems.

- (c) Governments and leaders in Higher Education, must institute policy frameworks that ensure that vulnerable groups in society such as the poor, the orphans and women are protected from the adverse effects of globalisation.

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