Special Issue Introduction: Exploring the Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Postsecondary Policies and Practices Toward Sustainable Development

Marcellus Forh Mbah[a*] and Ane Turner Johnson[b]

[a]Nottingham Trent University, UK

ORCID 0000-0002-4199-0819

[b]Rowan University, USA

ORCID 0000-0002-9848-2727

*Correspondence: marcellus.mbah@ntu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article serves as the introduction to the Special Issue on "Exploring the Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Postsecondary Policies and Practices Toward Sustainable Development." We begin by outlining sustainable development and the role of higher education in addressing sustainable development goals. We critique the epistemological assumptions that underlie sustainable development and that have led to its capture by Western development and science. We consider the importance of incorporating an Indigenous knowledge and practices into higher education in order to solve pressing social and environmental challenges. Finally, we discuss the reasoning for

this issue and set forth a series of arguments for choosing an open access journal as an appropriate modality for this inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has been defined, quite broadly, as meeting the needs of the present without compromising future generations' ability to meet their needs (WCED, 1987). In 2015, this definition was expanded into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets that serve as a framework for the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development, which seeks to reduce poverty and social inequality. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), reinforced in SDG 4, has catalyzed the incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals into education policy and practice, worldwide, placing education at the forefront of the social transformation needed to accomplish sustainable development (Ferrer-Estévez & Chalmeta, 2021). "The task of moving the course of the global ocean liner away from social injustice and environmental destruction is such that it requires the action of all in society, its institutions and individuals" (McCowan, 2019, p. 213). Postsecondary education is critical to the success of the SDGs and has a moral responsibility to "embody support for the SDGs as part of their social missions and core functions" (Leal Filho et al., 2021, p. 2). As a result, higher education institutions have increasingly taken up the call to incorporate notions of sustainability into the curriculum, student experiences, research engagement, community relationships, industry partnerships, and campus operations (Leal Filho & Brandli, 2016).

Organizations, networks, and initiatives have sprung up worldwide to assist universities in their endeavors toward engaging significant social, economic, and environmental challenges, like the Global Universities Partnership on Environment for Sustainability (GUPES), the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI), the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the Alliance of Ibero-American Networks of Universities for Sustainability and the Environment (ARIUSA), University Educators for Sustainable Development (UE4SD), Copernicus Alliance: European Network of Higher Education for Sustainable Development, and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), among many others (Ruiz-Mallén & Heras, 2020; Torabian, 2019). Since 2009, the International Sustainable Campus Initiative has recognized and awarded university efforts each year in the areas of whole systems approach, partnerships for progress, and cultural change for sustainability. The United Nations has recognized SDG hubs, highlighting the innovative work many institutions, in both the Global South and North, are doing toward specific goals. In 2018, the Times Higher Education created a global ranking of over 700 universities and their efforts toward advancing SDGs via research, teaching, outreach, and stewardship. Considering the not inconsiderable support, resources, and prestige associated with these various mechanisms for institutional change, there is reason for optimism that postsecondary education will fulfill its assumed role.

Yet, the effective integration of sustainable development into the mission and function of universities, beyond the rhetorical, is challenged by many factors: understanding of SDGs among students, faculty, and staff, support from management, bureaucratic rigidity, competition for resources and financial constraints, and disciplinary cultures (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Ruiz-Mallén & Heras, 2020; Ulmer & Wydra, 2019; among others). These disciplinary cultures, ones that promote knowledge centralization into discrete programs and units, point to institutionalized

epistemological problems that trouble the incorporation of sustainable development principles (Mbah et al., 2021). Furthermore, "the SDGs are not a problem-free, consensual package that universities can simply set their sights on and gather the political will and resources to achieve;" sustainable development is founded in certain epistemic assumptions that privilege Western orthodoxy (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021, p. 2). As Weiss (2017) has noted, sustainable development is a floating signifier in that it lacks a fixed or definitive meaning; consequently, contestations over the term have led to its capture by essentialist Western development and science at the expense of other forms of knowledge (Chankseliani et al., 2021; Kumalo, 2017; Rajāo et al., 2014).

Modern postsecondary education is replete with what de Sousa Santos (2007) called "abyssal thinking." It relies on so-called "expert knowledge" to solve wicked social problems, "radically excluding" knowledge on the other side of the abyss, the *other(ed)* ways of knowing, including Indigenous knowledge and associated practices that contain the "experiences, skills, and techniques, remembered and accumulated" of communities (Turner et al., 2008, p. 46). Indigenous knowledge is best understood as reflecting traditional, empirical, and revealed understandings of the world associated with "economic, cultural, political, spiritual, ecological and material forces and conditions" (Dei, 2000, p. 115). It is inseparable from "largely place-based relations and obligations," from the land and its people, and the practices that promote both social and environmental well-being (Latiluppe & Klenk, 2020, p. 7). Shizha and Emeagwali (2016) have stressed that Indigenous knowledge is in fact a scientific understanding of the world. "Rather than exercising dominion and power over nature as Eurocentric scientists and engineers do, Indigenous peoples live more in harmony with nature by systematically collecting data over many generations as flux naturally occurs in their land…" (Aikenhead & Ogawa, 2007, p. 561). If we are to see

science as the source of solutions for sustainability problems, then we must also look to Indigenous knowledge as a form of scientific know-how.

PURPOSE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In line with de Sousa Santos, we argue in this special issue that these forms of knowledges exist in co-presence, in a vast ecology, and it is this ecology that we must tap now to address sustainable development. Postsecondary education should play a critical role in the preservation and application Indigenous knowledge. When engaged authentically, Indigenous knowledge can have a decolonizing effect and contribute to the epistemological diversity of the university (Collins & Kalehua Mueller, 2016). However, postsecondary policies and practices often assess knowledge for its "market value," thereby gatekeeping the creation, development, and dissemination of diverse knowledges (Guilherme & Dietz, 2017, p. 19). This requires us to engage with questions of epistemic justice in the academy: "Research has a social context….There is, therefore, a need for researchers to take seriously the relationship between knowledge and cultural power" (Higgs, 2010, p. 2420). There are several practices that higher education institutions codify in order to maintain their role as arbiter of knowledge and promote university cultural power. The high cost of journal subscriptions, research produced in English and centralized in inaccessible formats (i.e., academic journals) (Meaghar, 2021), and the enforced use of theories, formats, methods, and concepts that delegitimize non-Western approaches (Faciolince & Green, 2021), all which prevent equitable knowledge distribution and are antithetical to sustainable development.

We can, as scholars, counterbalance this cultural power. Trisos et al. (2021) push us as scholars to "decolonize access" to knowledge by practicing reciprocity in research communities and contexts, using participatory research practices, and publishing in open access journals. These journals must be "open to the ecology of knowledges and the plurality of epistemologies, with an

inclusive and non-normative universalism" (Piron, 2018, para. 22). While not able to address all of the problems with global knowledge production regimes, open access can play a role in democratizing knowledge that leads to new understandings, exemplars, and best practices, enabling a more substantive contribution to sustainable development on the part of universities, scholars, and communities everywhere.

Authors' Voices

For this special issue, we have chosen to promote a discussion about postsecondary education institutions and their engagement with Indigenous knowledge for sustainable development through an open access journal, the *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, which we believe will enable us to share the outcomes of our work with scholars and communities around the world. In our own piece, we address how African researchers conceptualize Indigenous knowledge, use research practices that engage epistemic authorities and Indigenous language, and the challenges that contemporary higher education poses to African researchers and Indigenous communities. We highlight our participants' experiences in order to uncover the connections, both actual and envisioned, made through research relationships to sustainable development. We asked the authors represented in this special issue what motivated them to communicate their work, in this format, on these topics. Here is what they shared:

Meseret Hailu and Amanda Tachine, both assistant professors of Higher Education at Arizona State University, stated:

> We were driven by our joint commitment to Black and Indigenous communities and theorizing about their (our) ways of knowing. We hope that publishing our work in this journal will allow us to engage more deeply with critical scholars in different country contexts.

In their article, Hailu and Tachine incite us to see the complementarity of Black and Indigenous theorizing, considering their "parallel entanglements." They pose critical questions to scholars seeking to explore and expand upon cultural sustainability.

Kari Chew, an assistant professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Oklahoma, and co-author Sheilah Nicholas, professor of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona, exhorted:

> The university does not accept and embrace diverse knowledges as *gifts*. Students, particularly BIPOC students, go to university to address and meet community goals and needs. Meanwhile, the university has both a dismissive and an extractive perspective, claiming ownership of knowledge produced. Despite this lack of institutional support, students, faculty, and staff come together to carve out spaces for themselves. Our article was a carved-out space for ourselves to think, write, and reflect together—and, through the issue, be in relationship to others doing this shared work.

Chew and Nicholas, for the special issue, portray a conversation between Indigenous colleagues as they reflect on a mentor-mentee relationship and significant events in the process that emphasized cultural integrity, within the context of a university located on Indigenous lands.

Indigenous water scientist and activist, Kelsey Leonard, an assistant professor of Environment at the University of Waterloo, explained,

> As Indigenous Peoples we are often confronted by the myth that we and our knowledges do not belong in the academy. However, this collection is a living testament to Indigenous innovation and pathways for the recognition of Indigenous knowledges to meet our pressing sustainability challenges and empower future generations.

In her piece, Leonard critically investigates the sustainability content grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems present in the curriculums of Indigenous Higher Education Institutions on Turtle Island (the United States and Canada). She suggests that, despite funding challenges, there is evidence of innovation at these institutions that will position Indigenous youth and communities to respond to climate crisis.

Jing Lin, professor of International Education Policy at the University of Maryland, and her co-authors, Angela Stoltz, clinical faculty, and Ph.D. candidates Matthew Aruch and Annie Rappeport offered,

> We are driven to contribute to this special issue because we see that higher education institutions require a fundamental paradigm shift from a capitalist, colonial, industrial, and reductionist mentality toward an Indigenous Knowledge model, one that acknowledges the sacred value of nature, the rights of other non-human beings, the rights of Indigenous People to have a seat at the table for higher learning curriculum and programs, and the power and potential of transformative learning in collaborating with Indigenous communities.

To this, Aruch also added "part of my motivation was (as an ally/ partner) to amplify the voices, knowledge, and actions of Indigenous colleagues in Brazil as they continue to advocate for territorial and political sovereignty." Their collective manuscript represents their perspectives on teaching, partnerships, and activism to decolonize the academy.

Sonia Fonua, a teaching fellow at the University of Auckland, wrote, "I felt it was important to disseminate work from Oceania/the Southern Hemisphere more widely as we engage with Indigenous knowledges in different ways." In her article, Fonua offers an alternative approach to teaching that respects the culture and language of minoritized Tongan students at her university.

She presents the *'Ulungaanga faka-Tonga Fonu* as a cultural sustaining model that embeds Indigenous knowledge into formal teaching spaces.

The articles in this special issue are diverse, exploring Indigenous knowledge in higher education via an array of methodologies, geographies, communities, and theoretical orientations. As a result, we believe that the special issue has the potential to inform the relationship between the participation of higher education institutions in fostering sustainable development, supporting formal engagement with Indigenous knowledge, and bringing to light collaborations between universities and communities to address critical problems faced by societies across the globe. "[T]here is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. This means that the critical task ahead cannot be limited to generating alternatives. Indeed, it requires an alternative thinking" (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 63). In the final analysis, for higher education to be transformative, fundamentally changing the conditions that contribute to crisis, our epistemic approaches in the academy must transform to be more inclusive, equitable, and just.

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