Call for Expressions of Interest
Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) invites expressions of interest from researchers to prepare papers that will feed into the development of a research proposal for a project on the relationship between universities and social inequalities in low- and middle-income countries. Proposals may relate to background papers, literature reviews, and case studies. Three papers will be commissioned based on responses to this Call. UNRISD particularly welcomes expressions of interest from women, young researchers, and researchers from and based in developing countries.

Abstract

With the persistent and rising inequalities of our time encompassing not only income and wealth but also inequalities across race, gender, ethnicity and geographic region, it is critical to reinvent, reimagine and strengthen a wide range of policies and institutions that can play a role in overcoming inequalities. This Call, and the subsequent research project to be developed, focuses on universities as one such institution.

Participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, in parallel with heightened social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities stemming from a university degree. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth. Is higher education truly a key to social mobility in countries of the Global South today?

The present Call pertains to papers that will feed into the development of a proposal for a research project that will focus on the role of universities in reinforcing or lessening social inequalities in low- and middle-income countries. It will explore the following questions: What potential does higher education have today to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can the transformative potential of such institutions be fully harnessed for overcoming inequality?

Background on this Call for Expressions of Interest

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) aims to develop a proposal for a research project on *Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South.* UNRISD now invites expressions of interest from researchers to prepare papers that will feed into the development of the research proposal, to be submitted for funding in 2019.[1] The project will be part of the larger UNRISD policy-relevant research inquiry on Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization, which was launched in 2018.

Persistent and rising inequalities constitute one of the greatest challenges of our times. These inequalities include far more than income or wealth, encompassing disparities across race, gender, ethnicity, region and so on. In this context, it is critical to strengthen, reinvent and reimagine policies and institutions, and the role they can play, in overcoming inequalities. Within the broader context of the UNRISD inquiry [Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization,](#) UNRISD intends to develop a research project that will focus on universities as one such institution. Against the backdrop of current global trends in tertiary education, it will examine institutions that deliver tertiary education, universities in particular, and seek to explore their role in perpetuating or in overcoming inequality. We are especially interested in universities in developing countries, given the huge growth in demand for university education, the important role they play for development, and the challenges they are facing in these regions.

The objective is to develop a research project to explore three basic questions: What potential does higher education have to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can such institutions be transformed into tools for overcoming inequality?

Background on the Issue

Historically, higher education has been seen as a key force in fostering social mobility, as well as for overcoming inequalities across divides such as gender and race by increasing labour market opportunities. Further, it has the potential to impact society as a whole through the production of knowledge and the creation of a skilled and educated citizenry. But the existence of such institutions is not itself a guarantee of equitable outcomes. Recent literature on universities in the North, particularly in the Anglo-American world, suggest that the impact of higher education institutions may be quite varied. For example, one study analysing data from 30 million US college students from 1999 to 2013 documents several factors that affect higher education outcomes for mobility.[2] Other recent studies conclude that universities may actually be contributing to inequalities rather than helping to overcome them.[3] These inequalities manifest themselves at different levels in the way they impact access to higher education (such as inequality of incomes, the quality of educational institutions at the primary and secondary level, and freedom from other responsibilities such as work and childcare). Further, inequalities are often perpetuated within institutions themselves. In addition, despite the fact that many elite higher education institutions in the global North and the global South seek to offer access and support to students from non-elite backgrounds as an important part of their mission, these measures do not necessarily facilitate upward mobility to top positions in professional life.[4]

The situation in the developing world is different, but no less complex. Global data show that participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, but is rarely accompanied by an increase in opportunities in the labour market.[5] In fact, the growth in demand for tertiary education may be occurring simultaneously with jobless growth.[6] Further, the demand for higher education in many places in the global South has exceeded the capacity of public

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2   Chetty, Raj et al. 2017. "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility". NBER Working Paper No. 23618. Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research. http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/coll_mrc_paper.pdf.

3   Mettler, Suzanne. 2014. *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream*. New York: Basic Books.

4   Zimmermann, Seth D. 2016. *Making the one percent: the role of elite universities and elite peers*. NBER Working Paper 22900. National Bureau of Economic Research. http://www.nber.org/papers/w22900. See also: 2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey for Australia, and commentary, The Times Higher Education Supplement, January 10, 2019 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/australia-graduate-employment-and-employer-satisfaction-rise.

5   Marginson, Simon. 2016. "High Participation Systems of Higher Education". *The Journal of Higher Education*, 87(2).

6   The World Bank. 2018. *"Jobless Growth?"*. South Asia Economic Focus. Washington: The World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29650/9781464812842.pdf.

educational institutions, which have experienced budget cuts during structural adjustment and subsequent fiscal crises, meaning that growing demand has largely been satisfied by private providers with impacts for affordability and accessibility.[7] Data confirm the sharp divide in the developing world in terms of access, with rich students overwhelmingly outnumbering poor students in terms of attendance rates, and those students from disadvantaged social groups much more likely to attend non-selective universities.[8] Recent research finds that the intergenerational transmission of privilege is particularly strong in the least developed countries, while the mobility gap between poor and rich countries has increased over time.[9] While students' movements are emerging in different regions of the world claiming their rights for free education and participation in the governance of educational institutions,[10] fiscal austerity continues taking a toll on public educational institutions, as seen recently in Chile and Argentina for example.[11]

These developments call for a closer look at the role of tertiary education in low- and middle-income countries today—especially where expanding social aspirations are accompanied by growing demand for tertiary education and burgeoning inequality against a backdrop of increasing elite power. A full project proposal on universities and social inequalities, to be developed and submitted for funding in 2019 and to which the present Call will contribute, will have an analytical focus on institutions that deliver tertiary education, in particular, universities. The project will explore both how universities are impacting the broader social context and trends in inequality, and how they, in turn, are being impacted by it.

It is anticipated that the proposed research project, once developed, will consider the following questions:

- What role is higher education playing in engendering equality/inequality?
- Does this role vary by types of institutions that deliver tertiary education? For example, are there palpable differences between public and private institutions? Between institutions that deliver professional education vis-à-vis others? Between classroom-based and online learning programmes?
- What role do institutions of higher education, in particular universities, play in creating and consolidating elite classes and networks? How far-reaching is the impact of these elite networks on social mobility?
- How is the demand for higher education being met in in the global South, and how do the outcomes vary in terms of social mobility, equality, and public goods?
- What is the nature of the university's autonomy in the developing world? How does its relationship with the market on the one hand, and the state on the other, determine its impact on social inequalities?
- How do different actors and stakeholders influence policy and institutional reforms for tertiary education? What is the role of elites in this context?

In undertaking this analysis, the proposed project will aim (i) to contribute to a better understanding, based on new empirical evidence, of the role of universities in reducing social inequalities and contributing to sustainable development; and (ii) to raise evidence-based recommendations for the innovative design and implementation of tertiary education policies that lead to transformative institutions and outcomes.

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[7] UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report, International Institute for Educational Planning. 2017. "Six ways to ensure higher education leaves no one behind". Policy Paper 30. Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247862.

[8] Guzmán-Valenzuela, Carolina. 2016. "Global trends and their impact on Latin America: the role of the state and the private sector in the provision of higher education." Working paper 4. London: Centre for Global Higher Education. https://www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/publications/wp4.pdf.

[9] Leone, T. 2018. "Intergenerational mobility in education: Estimates of the worldwide variation." UNRISD, unpublished draft paper.

[10] Grugel, Jean and Jewellord Nem Singh. 2015. "Protest, citizenship and democratic renewal: the student movement in Chile". *Citizenship Studies,* 19(3):1-14.

[11] Delisle, Jason and Andrés Bernasconi. 2018. "Lesson's from Chile's transition to free college". Washington: Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/research/lessons-from-chiles-transition-to-free-college/.

Specifications of the Present Call

The present Call seeks expressions of interest from researchers to prepare the following types of papers, based on existing research:

1. Literature review or background research, particularly in relation to a region or country in the Global South.
2. Case studies
   - exploring the ways different countries are filling the demand for higher education and the resulting impacts on inequality, looking specifically at student enrollment data in terms of socioeconomic status, race, gender, ethnicity and region, assessed quality of these institutions, and resulting employment opportunities;
   - of specific institutional contexts, which examine ways inequalities are perpetuated or minimized within university settings;
   - exploring the role and influence of elite actors in shaping education policy in the Global South;
   - documenting how universities engage directly with the issue of inequality, for example through their approach to their core activities (such as curriculum, programmes, admission policies), engagement with communities/stakeholders, and support for research or advocacy focused on inequality.

Selected proposals will be developed into papers that will:
- feed into the development of a full project proposal on universities and social inequalities, which will be submitted for funding in 2019; and
- provide evidence and analysis, especially from the Global South, which can be brought to bear on ongoing UN debates and policy processes, including implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Three papers will be commissioned in total, out of proposals submitted in response to this Call.

Papers may be single or co-authored.

Length of proposal in response to this Call for Expressions of Interest: 500-800 words
Length of paper, if selected: 10,000 words
Language: English
Timeline:
- 17 March 2019, 23:59 CET – Deadline for submission of proposals
- 1 April 2019 – Selected applicants notified
- 1 July 2019 – First draft due
- 1 September 2019 – Final draft due

Researcher competencies, experience and skill requirements
- Post graduate degree in Economics, Political Science, Development Studies or other social science discipline (PhD desirable)
- Experience in development policy research
- Country expertise (Global South), thematic expertise (tertiary education, inequalities, social mobility, etc.)
- Proven publication record
- Solid methodological and research skills
- Fluency in English
- Ability to write clearly and concisely

UNRISD particularly welcomes expressions of interest from women, young researchers, and researchers from and based in developing countries.

Submission Process

Please ensure that you have read this Call for Expressions of Interest in its entirety before completing the EOI Submission Form.

All materials are available at www.unrisd.org/EOI-UnSi-2019.

Please then send the following via email to maggie.carter@un.org with the subject line "EOI Inequality submission" by 17 March 2019, 23:59 CET:

- the completed EOI Submission Form
- full CV (including academic record and list of publications)
- a sample of a recent single-authored piece of written work (published or unpublished) that is related to this research topic
- the names and contact details of two referees

Due to limited staff resources, only shortlisted candidates will be contacted.

For further information, contact maggie.carter@un.org