

HUMBOLDT FERNGESPRÄCHE



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## GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE DISPARITIES:

THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

Humboldt Ferngespräche – Discussion Paper No. 5 – April 2015

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Dr. Hebe Vessuri is an Argentine-born Venezuelan anthropologist and a pioneer sociologist of science in Latin America; she received a Dip. Anthr., a B.Litt., and a D. Phil. from Oxford University. She was a Senior Researcher and Head of the Department of Science Studies at the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research (IVIC), the Vice President of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), the President of the Council of United Nations University, and a member of the Board of the United Nations University Institute of New Technologies in Maastricht, the Netherlands. She currently works as a researcher in the Research Center of Environmental Geography (CIGA), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

Professor Dr. Andreas Eckert is the Chair of African History at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. He is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Forum Transregionale Studien and Director of the International Research Center "Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History (re:work)." Between 2002 and 2007, he was Professor of Modern History with a focus on African history at the University of Hamburg. As Visiting Professor and Fellow, he worked at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris), Indiana University in Bloomington, Harvard University, the University of Geneva, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Andreas Eckert writes regularly for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and DIE ZEIT.

## Summary

Education has been the object of many expectations and at times also the cause of disenchantment. Often ideologically charged, it is considered the means of reducing structural inequalities within societies. Nevertheless, access to education itself can be distributed in unequal ways, contingent on the very structures it is supposed to even out. Education can thus function both as a corrective for structural inequalities and as a means of reinforcing them. In addition, it is connected with global developments and debates such as UNESCO programs or OECD studies, which are not necessarily articulated within local contexts.

To discuss the issue of global knowledge disparities across the North-South divide, three leading scholars and practitioners in the field of the internationalization of education and research were invited in the framework of the international Winter Academy “Education, Inequality and Social Power. Transregional Perspectives” organized by the **Forum Transregionale Studien** and the **Max Weber Stiftung – Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland**.

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BARBARA ISCHINGER, HEBE VESSURI, ANDREAS ECKERT

## GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE DISPARITIES:

### THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

#### STATEMENTS BY BARBARA ISCHINGER

I am delighted to be back at the Humboldt University after operating as a Vice President here from 2000 to 2005. I am especially pleased to see so many young people showing interest in discussing the North-South divide concerning inequality, education, and power. As an introduction to my statement, I would like to draw upon the recently published UN Human Development Report.<sup>1</sup> My experience with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggests that figures are always good food for thought. According to the numbers presented in the UNHDP report, 1.8 billion of the earth's 7.3 billion inhabitants are between the ages of 10 and 24. Some of the most important questions that the report raised were: "What are we going to do with all these young people? How can they lead a fulfilled life? Will they have access to education? Will they have access to health provision?" Nine out of ten of these young people live in the developing world. 57 million children in this world do not attend elementary school. In addition to this, 36 percent of young people worldwide are unemployed. These numbers give an impression of the dimensions

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program: *Human Development Report 2014. Sustaining Human Progress, Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience.*

and the proportions of the challenges in the field of education that we are facing today.

I would like to focus on some of the asymmetries in higher education. These range between the older generation and the younger generation, between women and men, in regard to aspects of employment as well as internationalization. Most of the following figures are taken from the 2014 edition of *Education at a Glance*<sup>2</sup>. In OECD countries, young adults show higher rates of tertiary education attainment than the older generation. This especially applies to young women, whose rate of tertiary attainment is 20 percent higher than the rate of tertiary attainment among older women. Some countries show a much wider gap between generations. A unique example of this generation gap can be seen in South Korea. South Korea developed from an agricultural country into an industrialized country within a mere 30 years. It has one of the largest differences in percentage points between younger and older tertiary educated adults. 30 years ago, the country had only a very minor proportion of people who had attained tertiary education. Today, this figure amounts to 40 percent. This means something. This means that it is possible.

African countries believe in the South Korean model. The model of utilizing education as the primary engine for better life indexes and increased life fulfillment is also being used in other countries. On average, 39 percent of young people across OECD countries will graduate from university level programs during their lifetime. This is a current pattern and a trend prediction, thus the 39 percent can be applied worldwide. A much higher percentage, 58 percent, will enter higher education, but not necessarily graduate. An increase in higher education attainment across OECD countries is mostly notable among women. In emerging countries, the rise in students attending university applies to men and women alike.

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2 OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014*: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.

Let's briefly look at China and India. I recently visited these countries and find it incredible how they are becoming powerhouses of knowledge and of graduates, especially in the scientific fields of engineering and business. The Chinese Director General for Higher Education recently told me that he is currently in charge of 35 million students enrolled in higher education and is taking care of 2,500 institutions of higher education. India has more than 40 million students enrolled. At the same time, large asymmetries in the general level of education in these countries are obvious. India has large numbers of illiterates not enrolled in school, not even elementary school. Its government opted for a two-way policy, focusing on the promotion of higher and basic education alike. Of course, all the aforementioned aspects relate to quantity only. Assessing the quality of teaching and learning is a very important and rather complex issue, which I cannot dwell upon at this point.

An important topic that I can mention only briefly is internationalization. In 2012, 4.5 million young people moved throughout the world to study in countries outside of their homeland. This figure has increased fivefold within the last five years. Another important aspect is the relation between higher education and unemployment. What is the value of higher education when seen in the context of unemployment? This is a pressing question, also in the European context. Contrary to what is often being reported in the media, statistics prove that young people with higher education have a much lower unemployment rate than those who do not have higher education. Thus, despite the asymmetries mentioned above, higher education is worth the effort.

#### **STATEMENTS BY HEBE VESSURI**

The knowledge divide between rich and poor countries poses one of the most relevant challenges when discussing development. A lack of research and development infrastructure damages the political agenda, preventing countries from committing to future science investments.

When seen with respect to science, the North-South divide has a very perverse implication, i.e., the invisibility and marginality of knowledge production in the South and East. Although there is a tremendous international effort to build up capacities, these capacities very often remain within narrow academic circles, reproducing themselves in isolation from society. Another important aspect is the issue of scientific publishing as “the” golden and only rule of scientific productivity and as the criterion of quality evaluation. As was already pointed out by Prof. Ischinger, asymmetries change all the time. We live in a very dynamic world, a world that is not symmetric, but in which asymmetries constantly move around because of various factors. For example, in those cases where fragments of our research and development infrastructure exist, dominant cultures of law and institutions have deep historical roots and are closely intertwined with the resulting science production. So, despite the long history of some regional science communities, most of them have not succeeded in reducing interregional inequalities, much less have they become a means to change the invisibility and marginality of knowledge production in the South and East.

Nevertheless, the world is one, although it may often seem to be a considerable number of universes. And in this world, dominant relations in science production still exist. Researchers in the peripheries have continued to experience varying degrees of dependence on the conceptual and methodological frameworks produced in the centers. The result: asymmetric scientific outputs and outcomes. Asymmetric scientific outputs seem to be reinforced by a widely distributed cult of rationality, utilitarianism, productivity, consumption, democracy, and even human rights, as well as by a greater homogenization of research profiles and performance. Prejudice is the wrong foundation for interaction.

Where are we, and where are we heading? How can we identify possible and desirable futures of science for an equitable society? Is a new geography of knowledge beginning to emerge? Prof. Ischinger mentioned the fantastic cases of China, India, and all the emerging



countries, which really have come into force. New trajectories have emerged and have started to reconfigure the topography of knowledge production and diffusion. Novel forms of networking, mediated by information technologies, have affected diverse knowledge flows in the contemporary era. A series of technological and institutional transformations has generated global cultural flows. Their intensity, diversity, and rapid diffusion exceed those of earlier eras, once again altering the balance. Accordingly, the centrality of national cultures, national identity, and their institutions is being challenged in terms of the construction of science. We perceive a growing claim for inclusiveness, aiming to break away from the stratified power structures that have prefigured the dichotomies between the North, South, core, periphery, East, and West. This trend includes the involvement of scientific communities arising from the margins with very different modalities of operation, including open access to knowledge production and collaborative knowledge platforms, which network expertise and support a whole range of new activities.

All of these phenomena might result in a richer and more diversified social sciences world system. Original aspects in organization and infrastructure have paved the way to unprecedented governance of knowledge production and diffusion in the social sciences. Contradictory forces challenge the purpose and aspiration of the social sciences and their contribution worldwide. One of the main challenges for me in this prestigious university, “THE” model of the research university, lies in envisaging the end of the university as we know it. The university will be something else in the future. Out of 1,000 world universities assessed, only nine Latin American universities made it into the Academic Rankings of World Universities (ARWU) of 2014. ARWU criteria require every university to have a Nobel laureate or a Field medalist as well as highly cited research papers published in *Nature* or *Science*. In addition, universities with a significant number of papers indexed by Science Citation Index or Science Citation Index Expanded are also included. In total, more than 12,000 universities are actually ranked, but only a list of the best 500 is published online.

The ARWU measures only research, and while it is probably the most precise in measuring its particular set of variables, these variables can be seriously questioned in terms of their relevance and pertinence to different contexts.

I would like to stress the importance of knowledge politics and its role for the future constitution of society. It is not easy to generate robust scenarios for knowledge politics, as they are by no means obvious. Knowledge politics differs from knowledge policy. Different forms of knowledge politics occur in different contexts, they involve different persons and they lead to different agendas. But they share a common concern, i.e., taking action from where we are now. And since we are in universities, I would like to propose the possibility that universities – traditionally being classic hubs of hegemonic technoscience – could also become zones of barter and synthesis for different types of knowledge production, which compete for epistemic validity or which are committed to active processes of hybridization.

**DISCUSSION BARBARA ISCHINGER AND HEBE VESSURI,  
CHAired BY ANDREAS ECKERT**

**Andreas Eckert:**

I would like to touch upon an issue that both of you have briefly mentioned, i.e., the emergence of a new “geography of knowledge”, that is, a reconfiguration of the global landscape of knowledge with new players like China, Brazil, and India. We observe that many private American universities invest their endowments in, or even more, establish campuses in Dubai, Shanghai, and so on. I think we should say “farewell” to the idea that we in Europe are still the center of the world. Still, even with these new players and also within the “Old North”, a huge amount of inequality exists, even growing hierarchies that determine the point of entrance and the rules of the game. When we talk about “India as a new player”, we should look at who exactly is playing and who is accessing. Maybe you could say a bit more about this kind of new division within the world of knowledge and education. Are there other ways to capture this kind of new landscape? Another question concerns the role of the nation state. Is it still the most important player or is it a player with increasingly limited possibilities to shape what education and knowledge is about?

**Barbara Ischinger:**

There are certainly countries where you can still see that knowledge that is produced within the university is very much nationally oriented. I visited Japan a few days ago. In Japan, there are just a few universities that are internationally oriented or maybe teach some classes in English. This means that the input of foreign scholars and students is limited. The adherence to the Japanese language and one’s own culture is still predominant. This is not the case in other, also emerging countries. In terms of inequalities, when I look at Brazil, I think this is a country that has done quite well in ensuring timely educational investments. The “bolsas de estudo”, which give you a child allowance

only if you secure early childhood and elementary education for your child, have shown fantastic results. But there are also other trends in Latin America. In Chile, for example, privatization in education causes more and more exclusion. So, you really cannot see one single pattern. One has to take into account the general setup, which includes the access to education, housing, financing, and so on. In a situation where housing areas fund district education, an area with lower tax revenue provides a poorer start. This is a complex issue and I can only touch upon some of its elements.

**Hebe Vessuri:**

I have lately revisited this topic of the nation state, national configurations, and so on. Some of us are critical of national bureaucracies and their attributes. But nation states have also something to do with governance and the organization of the public good. How does this take place in the sphere of education? I am currently carrying out a research project on the internationalization of social sciences in Mexico; this is happening in many places, also in Europe. All the universities and ministries of science or education are talking about the internationalization of the university, the sciences, etc. But sciences were international from their very beginning. What, then, is meant now by internationalization? Does it have to do with more circulation of students, more Erasmus programs or something equivalent? For the case of Latin America, it goes far beyond that, and we would like to know what it means and what the possible implications are. In the case of the social sciences, internationalization has very often been reduced to co-authorship and international networking. To describe the situation there, Latin American colleagues have coined terms such as “cognitive exploitation” and “cognitive subordination in the construction of networks.”

How can you construct networks that are less asymmetric? There is an experimental initiative from the IDRC, the International Development Research Cooperation Agency of Canada, which is supporting a program on open collaborative science for development. We had

our first workshop in Nairobi a couple of weeks ago to support networks within the so-called Global South. I complained. I said: “Why the Global South? It is an exclusionary concept, a way of labeling to exclude people by placing them in a particular corner. The answer I got was that instead of signaling the exclusion of the South, this was a way of showing real interest in the South and protecting it in order that genuine Southern research agendas could manage to be expressed and reflected in the program. Obviously, these problems are always challenging. The aim is to reduce asymmetries and create places beyond the old dichotomies “Europe and the rest” or “the West and the rest.” Power is diffused in different ways and hubs are created throughout the world. Yet, we should beware of asymmetries remaining and becoming reconfigured, while the world becomes more unequal and provides more challenges.

**Andreas Eckert:**

You mentioned that we can observe the privatization of education throughout the world. Connecting to that issue, let us address the economization of education and knowledge. If you look at the official standards of the European Research Council, the keywords are employability, stakeholders, and so on. It seems that the idea that education and knowledge should entail a critical element is very much gone. They are transformed into a practical thing; fields of humanities and social sciences are being purged. International programs orient toward economic interest. Coming from a very important international player in the field of education – to what extent do economic factors play a role in pushing forward a certain kind of education that is especially useful for economic exploitation or, at the very least, economic encounters? Where do you see space for what could be labeled “critical” education for educating critical citizens?

**Barbara Ischinger:**

I think that there is more and more understanding about what education should look like and awareness that many mistakes have been

made in the past. At some point, all of a sudden economic issues were in the forefront, without any understanding of what that really meant. This trend worked against the humanities and the so-called exotic fields. I remember when I was the Vice President here about ten years ago, we received a visit from the President of Cornell University. We gave him a tour, we showed him our little collections, museums, etc. After the tour he said, “This is unheard-of! You have such a rich humanities department. I had to destroy it [at Cornell].” So, he also saw the pitfalls. There are several factors to mention in this regard. First, there was a pressure for more cooperation with the private sector, fundraising, etc. Second, there was a (mis)understanding that with a degree in the humanities a graduate had fewer chances to be employed. At one time, a degree in the humanities automatically led you into the civil service. This is no longer true. Naturally, the question arose about what to do with graduates in these fields. A lot of re-thinking had to take place. Interestingly, the OECD Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) showed that people do well in life and have a fulfilled life when during their education, regardless of the field, they have learned problem solving, mastered creativity, and so on. There will be a lot of discussions around this issue in the near future.

### **Hebe Vessuri:**

The public–private divide is dissolving in everyday life. We have more and more combinations of public–private actions, with very interesting connotations. When people talk about the privatization trend in the Global South in general, it is often done with a derogatory or negative connotation, because it is linked to economization or commercialization. It affects the poor people. The poorer you are, for instance in Brazil or in Mexico, the more you have to pay for your education. The paradox is that very often public universities are attended by the well-to-do, while children of the poor classes have to attend private institutions of higher education.

The commercialization strategies often involve confusing research with consulting, although they are two different things. This

is not to suggest that consulting is necessarily wrong, but that it may lead to a dangerous situation when, from a pool of knowledge potentially available, a consultant rapidly picks up only bits and pieces of information and bases his or her decisions upon them. Insufficient knowledge produces problems. The ensuing cynicism that is likely to follow reminds me of the logic of some colleagues in South America. They say, “How much is there?” and “What is the deadline?” And only at the end would they ask, “What is it about?” That was their last priority, which came as an afterthought. This is very pernicious; it is not good for knowledge.

The other issue related to the privatization of the public good is the fact that we are in a world of mass education. I would suggest that we still need an intellectual elite; I hate the word, but I don’t know how to replace it. Somewhere, we must have the people who know, think, produce – the ace for the future. But the question arises about their placement: where will they be? Are they going to be in a private institution that isolates them from talented people from all segments of society? Will they be at public universities? In Latin America, for example, we have a strong tradition of public education that is being attacked from all sides. But can the state continue to endlessly pay for public education? This is a real problem and I do not have a solution to it.

**Andreas Eckert:**

Thank you. I think it is time to include some questions from the audience. This is a unique opportunity to intervene in this debate.

**Question:**

How can universities become more important?

**Barbara Ischinger:**

When I was the Vice President here, I learned that the university has to demonstrate its relevance again and again. You cannot work only internally. You also have to share your knowledge. The Humboldt-Universität

zu Berlin has many professors, lecturers, and also students who engage in many activities, which are known throughout the city. At the time, for instance, I wanted to rescue the Museum for Natural History, which was about to fall apart since the Senate decided to close it. I started a campaign with students and the faculty to draw attention to this museum. We raised an enormous amount of money from citizens. So, things can be done. You have to show a certain relevance and you have to engage all levels. Wonderful things can be done, leading students to be proud of themselves, their universities, and their contribution.

**Hebe Vessuri:**

I think something curious is happening today with knowledge. Something we never believed could happen. This is why I mentioned science politics, because knowledge has become a ground of contestation. Today we are facing the coexistence of different forms of knowledge as well as contested knowledge. The university could be a very good platform for the kind of debate that is opening up in society. I think that we agree that it is an arena in which different ideas can be ventilated, where we can throw “intellectual stones.” We may end up synthesizing new forms of knowledge that will enable us to go further. It is not just better policy that we are going to get, but rather a politics of knowledge. The university could be one of these places, but enormously enlarged in order to open up to society.

**Question:**

How do you understand the role of rankings for the educational institutions in the future?

**Barbara Ischinger:**

Rankings will remain, that is certain. They can no longer be eradicated. Shanghai started this game. At the time when the Shanghai Ranking first became internationally recognized, it did not mean to become an international methodology. It was supposed to rate only universities



within that region. Then someone picked it up and made it a big thing. What I am suggesting, and that is what we have been doing during the past years at OECD, is to create better indicators. Teaching must also be included in the assessment; research is not the only factor. Professors and lecturers should be given credit for good teaching when students really make progress and learn well. The university should be given credit for this. There are methodologies to include teaching. We have done a feasibility study with 18 countries worldwide to create indicators for teaching and learning, which were accepted. We will see whether we can contribute in that field and create more balance.

**Hebe Vessuri:**

I do not know whether building up a world market of knowledge with universities as its bricks is the effect of ranking or if ranking is the result of it. I agree that we need better indicators, much better indicators, and more complete indicators. Probably we do not need Nobel Prize winners everywhere, though it is great if we have them; other elements are more significant. The kinds of indicators that existing rankings are based on are flawed. We now have Thomson Reuters, Scopus, and so on; the club of the main journals has also bought the best, or at least the most prestigious, ranking systems. As a result, there is a strong composite of actors who will give credits to each other. A few “win”, but what happens with the rest, with the developing world? This is creating perverse results. I am referring to the publications, to the club of journals, which has distorted the basic practices of publishing results for the growth of science. That is why there are a number of people who are bringing up the idea of global repositories of knowledge, trying to ultimately replace the journals. The journals were born at one point in history – they are contingent; they may disappear. Today only those journals that produce prestige make sense, deepening discrimination: “This is good. That is bad.” If you publish in Nature, it is good, if you do not publish in Nature, it is bad. But how many papers can you publish in Nature? At the end of the day, the dominant evaluation patterns and rankings are producing a number of perverse distortions.

**Question:**

What does the contemporary massification of education mean for educational standards and the world population generally?

**Barbara Ischinger:**

We could have a long discussion about massification. For the majority of the graduates, massification has certainly uplifted their lifestyle and their life standards. It has provided more employment security. There are certainly many false institutions of higher education in India and even in Japan as a result of massification. Japan had to close about 200 private institutions of higher education after evaluating them. Japan is doing that right now. Governments are increasingly aware of the problems resulted from immense privatization.

**Question:**

The North-South divide is increasingly shaped by the so-called brain drain. How do you assess it? What does it mean for the future geography of knowledge?

**Barbara Ischinger:**

“Brain drain” is a big topic and the more modern term is “brain circulation”. It sounds friendlier. There are always many perspectives to this. It is certainly wrong, if a country in the North provides so many attractions and impoverishes another country by taking out all the doctors and all the nurses and so on. So, should there be some quota? Should there be some regulation? This is an issue on which politicians also have to join the discussion. When I talked to South African politicians, of course they expressed great concern about what happened to them and their well-trained people. On the other hand, one can also understand that highly qualified people want to make their living, to have an offer that allows them to have appropriate living standards.

**Hebe Vessuri:**

The way “brain drain” is interpreted is a matter of wording. We spoke

about “brain gain,” now we are talking about “brain circulation,” we can even say “brain travelling”. We can invent many things. But it is a terrible problem for the countries that lose out in this battle.

**Andreas Eckert:**

One should just add of course that some of the “brain drain” is also caused by political situations, not only by economic wants. Thank you very much for “draining your brains” to us. I think we are just touching the tip of the iceberg, there are so many things related to the topic of our discussion today. Again, thank you very much for coming.

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