**Aims and Responsibilities of Universities in Solving Problems Related to Global Migration**

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International migration is one of the most important and contentious public issues of our time, as demonstrated by its prominence on the agendas of the recent G‐8 meeting, the Davos World Economic Forum, United Nations meetings, in bilateral and multi‐lateral discussions, and at today’s session at the World Universities Congress .

One of the reasons for the high profile of the topic is its interconnection with other global issues. The movement of people is both a cause and a consequence of conflict, environmental changes, development and globalization. At the same time, migration is essential to the economic development of both developed and developing countries, although it has failed to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and in some cases contributes to a widening of economic disparities (GCIM, 2005).

In the 2009 *Transatlantic Trends*, close to half or more of adults in the US and in the EU countries surveyed[[1]](#footnote-1) perceived migration to be more of a problem than an opportunity, and from 2008 to 2009 this perception increased in every country in the study[[2]](#footnote-2) .

There are a number of reasons for these fears. First, the influx of large numbers of people who differ from native-born residents in ethnicity, or in social, religious or cultural practices challenges deep-seated definitions of community that are based on “a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity-in short, to a particular culture” (Etzione 2002:p.83). Although these common bonds and shared values reduce conflict, the virtue of community is also a normative defect in that bonding is more easily achieved with people of similar backgrounds, and membership in a community implies not only inclusion of members, but also the exclusion of nonmembers, who may be treated less well (p.85).

Migration also challenges state sovereignty. States claim exclusive authority to make decisions regarding who may enter, and who may become a permanent member of society. Regardless of the economic utility of opening borders to economic migrants, a loosening of restrictions is precluded by fears over the loss of sovereignty, national identity and control over political institutions (Weiner, 1985).

Rules of entry are also intricately related to questions of relations between and among states, and in this equation, as in so many others, it is the receiving countries of the ‘Global North’ that hold the power. To prove this point, one need only look at the list of signatories of the United Nations ‘Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families’. No Western receiving countries have signed the convention. In spite of statements regarding the importance of human rights on the part of many heads of states, such rights are inadequately extended to migrant laborers. Similar barriers exist to the granting of full rights to other immigrants and refugees within developed countries. Rudiger (2006) states the problem succinctly when she asks whether the right to equality and inclusion can be advanced at all in the context of nation-states’ mechanisms of exclusion:

The intricate link between the state and the nation, and thus between rights and belonging, effectively restricts equality to those who already identify with, and belong to a predefined community whose composition is controlled by conformity. (p.57-58)

Because of the primacy of considerations of state sovereignty, cross-national consensus on reasonable migration policies is extremely difficult to achieve. In 2006, I was an observer at the High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development held in New York. The meeting was the first multilateral UN meeting devoted exclusively to international migration. It was no accident that the forum took so long to come about, or that the focus was on *dialogue*, rather than *action*. Although the meeting occurred at a time when migration policies were being hotly debated in many countries, the main focus of the Dialogue was on abstract principles of the need to better integrate migration policy and development planning—a laudable objective, but one that didn’t progress to concrete policy recommendations. Within the context of UN politics, itself the Dialogue took place after rejection of a recommendation by the Global Commission on International Migration that the body create a global migration facility and secretariat within the UN. Nearly all of the participating countries supported the notion of continuing the high-level dialogues, but only so long as they were state-led and non-binding.

In contrast, a parallel meeting of NGOs that coincided with the High Level Dialogue included dramatic discussions of the need to implement a rights-based approach to international migration. Attendees also voiced concern over the small number of UN member states that had ratified the Convention on Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

The need for academics to assist in the formation of public policy on migration is great. The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM, 2005) notes that “states and other stakeholders, especially, but not exclusively those in less prosperous regions of the world, lack the capacity required to formulate and implement effective migration policies.” (p2).

Given this state of affairs, how can the university assist states in formulating policies that both strengthen the national community and foster integration and inclusion of immigrants? I suggest two important strategies: first, to increase academic attention on public policy solutions to real-world issues, such as migration, and, secondly, to foster education that promotes democracy and democratic values.

Increasing academic attention to real-world problems related to human migration

Achievement of this objective would require that faculty come down from the ivory tower to conduct policy-relevant work on substantive issues. This is no small task, because it goes against the disciplinary “guildism” and increasingly narrow research foci that keep many universities looking inward, rather than taking action on global issues. Harkavy (2006: 15) underscores this problem in what he calls the ‘disciplinary fallacy’ in American universities, i.e. that “professors are duty-bound only to serve the scholastic interests and preoccupations of their disciplines”, and the increasing status, wealth and power of elite research universities.

On the other hand, there is significant potential for an increase in policy-relevant research on migration. There are few academic disciplines in the social sciences or professional school curricula that don’t have direct applications—consider, for example, the relevance of the movement of human populations to the study of sociology, anthropology, history, politics, public affairs, regional studies, law, human relations, languages, linguistics, communications, development studies, social welfare, business, demography, public health, geography, international relations, ethics and human rights.

What is needed is to go beyond ‘purely academic’ discussions and to undertake research that includes “more and better experimentation, data gathering, monitoring and keen observation to develop a sense of what is working in migration policy at any level; what of that is specific to a particular time, place and set of historical or geographical relationships; and what might be generalized and taken to a larger scale.” (Newland, 2005,p3).

There are some excellent examples of such work that could serve as a model for us all. A few that come to mind are studies from the IZA Institute for the Study of Labor in Bonn, papers and books commissioned by the Russell Sage Foundation in New York, and brief policy papers written by researchers for the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

Fostering Education that Promotes Democracy and Democratic Values

Within developed countries migration is the source of sharp disagreements between those who approach the subject from the perspective of human rights and the conviction that diversity drives economic and social growth, and those who fear its implications. The latter appear to be ‘winning’’, judging by the proliferation of restrictions on international migrants and asylum seekers, the deportation of large groups of migrants from both developed and developing countries, and the equation of migration (and especially irregular migration) with terrorism and threats to security. In the *Transatlantic Trends* (2009)survey cited earlier, over a quarter of European and American respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *legal* immigrants increase the threat of a terrorist attack on their countries; 39% of Europeans and 49% of Americans agreed with this statement when the referent was “illegal immigrants”.

On the other hand, there is public support for policies that foster integration. In the same survey a majority of residents in both Europe and the United States were in favor of granting legal immigrants “the same social benefits as national citizens”, and high percentages (43 and 44 percent respectively) supported the legalization of irregular migrants.

Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson (2006), reminds us that human rights concerns are present at every stage of the migratory cycle, beginning in countries of origin—where human rights situations may have motivated emigration--during transit, and in the countries of destination, where migrants often face discrimination and unequal treatment. She points out that migrants particularly face a ‘protection gap’ because they fall between “the two stools of citizens’ rights and those of internationally protected individuals, such as refugees “. (p. 7)

Today those international protections have been markedly weakened. For students of migration and human rights the big question in Europe is whether European governments will violate the provisions of the Geneva Convention and the European Convention of Human Rights in order to adopt restrictive policies designed or purported to protect their countries from terrorism (Muus, 2004). Judging by the dramatic decreases in the numbers of asylum seekers and increases in restrictive migration policies in EU countries, those advocating for security measures rather than protection of rights seem to have the upper hand. The number of persons seeking asylum in the EU has gone from 675,000 in 1992 to 385,000 in 2001, and 238,000 in 2008—in spite of the fact that EU membership over the same period increased from six to 27 countries. In the United States the rights of immigrants and refugees has not been as strongly articulated as in Europe, but in the years since September 11, 2001 attention to border security and restrictions on the rights of immigrants have been dramatic. Similar trends can be observed in other major receiving countries.

Members of the GCIM commission articulated a set of principles for action that could serve as an outline of migration-related policy research priorities in the academy. These include:

* Migrating out of choice
* Reinforcing economic and developmental impact
* Addressing irregular migration
* Strengthening social cohesion through integration
* Protecting the rights of migrants
* Enhancing governance: coherence, capacity and cooperation

Universities can play a significant role in promoting democratic values by working in these areas, and also by fostering what the Council of Europe has called ‘education for democracy and diversity’. The core competences of such education have been outlined in a report issued jointly by the Council of Europe and the US Steering Committee of the International Consortium for Higher Education:

1. Knowledge, including the understanding of concepts such as democracy, human rights, justice, equality, and citizenship, and their application at local, regional, national and international levels;
2. Civic knowledge of the historical and contemporary contexts of rules, norms and values inherent in political systems;
3. Understanding of the interconnectedness of our societies and an appreciation of the ways that diverse cultures, identities and histories shape political systems and influence relations between societies and global trends
4. Knowledge of moral reasoning, and the ability to judge the ethical consequences of actions.

Nussbaum describes this last competence eloquently as the ‘cultivation of humanity’, which she defines as teaching students to see themselves “as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern” (2006. p5). Such perspectives can only be promoted through interdisciplinary collaborations among historians, economists, political scientists, public health professionals, ethicists, attorneys, public policy researchers, and specialists in human rights.

We are living in a time of intellectual ferment and economic crisis when the role of the university in society is being questioned as never before. One hopes that the result of this ferment will be an increase in policy-relevant research and attention to core values that will foster student and faculty engagement in democratic institutions.

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1. France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, UK [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. with the exception of Canada, for which there was no 2008 data for comparison [↑](#footnote-ref-2)