

IDS Policy Briefing

The latest development issues for policy-makers from the Institute of Development Studies

Learning to participate

The role of Higher Learning Institutions as development agents

By developing collaborative and participatory learning approaches, Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) can help build the capacity of individuals to undertake key development roles. They can also contribute to institutional change and poverty reduction. What are the opportunities and challenges facing HLIs in their effort to support participation and development processes?

Learning participation: Why now?

Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) have an important role to play in bringing about social, political and economic change. As crucial components of global research systems, they have the potential to bridge the global with the local, providing a real opportunity to scale up local knowledge, needs and priorities that can be incorporated into international agendas (see panel right). But it is vital that the learning promoted by HLIs is relevant, and congruent with the reality of life in the wider community.

HLIs are often prevented from engaging intensively and systemically in collaborative learning by internal constraints. At the level of teacher and student interactions, blockages may be created through a lack of needed competences or incompatible sets of values, attitudes and beliefs. There are external challenges too, where effective linkages, networking and collaborations in community-based development activities are stalled or prevented due to unyielding bureaucracy and power hierarchies, shortages of resources and capacity, and the absence of political will.

Such obstacles have been perceived as having negative impacts on the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education, and some stakeholders have been dissatisfied with the

WHAT ARE HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS (HLIs)?

They include universities, schools and colleges offering formal programmes, as well as 'non-formal', governmental or sectoral institutions with specialised training programmes for experienced professionals.



Teachers participate in in-service training in Afghanistan

contribution of HLIs to sustainable poverty alleviation. Further scepticism has arisen also around the high costs involved in higher education, and the relatively low percentage of the population who benefit directly from the services of the sector. These perceptions have been compounded further by:

- Resistance of universities to change and innovation in organisational and educational strategies, approaches, processes and methodologies.
- Greater credence placed on acquiring research funds and publishing articles in learned journals than on improvements in the facilitation of teaching and learning.
- Belief in institutions of higher learning as repositories of expertise and knowledge that can be transferred effectively to learners through the process of telling and, occasionally, demonstrating.
- Rarity of cases where university teachers receive, or are required to undertake, training in educational concepts and methods.
- Orientation of students towards expert-led, teacher-centred approaches and behaviours, which they then replicate in their working lives.

Who benefits?

- Community based organisations and non-governmental organisations gain academic support, resources and facilities of HLIs in their research and learning initiatives.
- Diverse HLI internal stakeholders stand to benefit: students, through experiential learning in and from the community; researchers through relevant and pragmatic research; and managers and administrators, through cross-departmental and interdisciplinary initiatives.
- Policy-makers and donors benefit from scaling-up of local needs. They gain from the direct link between the strengthening of HLIs and other levels of education, through Teacher Training and curriculum development, and from the growth of a cadre of professionals with valuable knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- Individuals gain skills and abilities on a personal level through the processes of critical reflection and experiential learning and the provision of a space in which transformative learning can flourish.



LTP: A global dialogue

An initiative for **Learning and Teaching Participation (LTP)** in institutions of higher learning began in April 2002. Hosted by the Participation Group of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) the original purpose of the dialogue was to enable institutions of higher learning to develop and deliver more effective education programmes and to contribute to a wider transformation of individuals, institutions and society.

The LTP global dialogue has gathered steadily in momentum to become a substantial network of people involved in teaching and learning participation, both through theory and in practice. Since the many and varied efforts to promote LTP in institutions of higher learning have occurred often on an individual basis in many different parts of the world, the dialogue is establishing a space for these to be shared more widely.

Key events have included a series of e-fora which involved participants from around the world. Also, an international workshop on LTP in April 2003 provided an opportunity to engage more intensively with the issues, face to face.

For more information about the dialogue and how to join the discussion, visit the LTP website at www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/networks/learnparticip/

What can participatory and collaborative learning offer?

Globally, in development circles, there is increasing interest in (and healthy debate around) promoting the institutionalisation and spread of participation in society. From grassroots projects to voluntary organisations, and from governments to large funding agencies, 'participation' has been embraced as a way to build greater voice, accountability and trust into relationships between people and institutions. Inherent in the idea of participation is that poor and marginalised people should take part in, and indeed drive, the decision-making processes that shape their lives. This involves the use of a range of approaches and methods, and requires changes in behaviour, attitudes and power relationships by everyone involved.

In order to promote and increase participation effectively and ethically, there is a growing need for experienced and well-trained people who are active and open to its meaning, methods and practice. Over the years, efforts have been made by individuals, groups and even whole institutions, to support organisational and institutional learning and change that enhances the developmental potential of HLIs, as well as the overall quality and impact of the participation that they teach.

The international dialogue on Learning and Teaching Participation (see LTP panel left) has shown that there are many individuals and groups engaged in collaborative and participatory learning approaches, with some considerable successes identified.

The Learning and Teaching Participation dialogue has provided an opportunity for individuals around the world to discuss their vision for what amounts to a paradigm shift in many HLIs; where teachers become facilitators in learning partnerships with colleagues, students and community members in the development agenda of sustainable poverty reduction.

What key challenges do HLIs face in learning to participate?

There are many challenges facing the institutionalisation of learning and teaching participation. These are felt particularly by individuals and groups that seek to bring their initiatives from the margins to the centre of HLIs. Many advocates and champions of such initiatives are striving to deal with these challenges by addressing questions such as:



- How to support the evolution of 'learning organisations', by negotiating power relations and hierarchies, especially those involving teachers, learners and institutional managers?
- How to overcome structural constraints to learning and teaching participation, and promote and achieve an interdisciplinary approach to learning within institutions?
- How to change attitudes and behaviour acknowledging that emotions and beliefs strongly affect practice, and play a vital part in the learning process?
- How to establish assessment and evaluation systems that are well suited to innovative teaching and learning practices whilst assuring quality and rigour?
- How to ensure that participatory concepts, approaches and methodologies used are relevant to the particular culture and context in which they are located?
- How to support and build capacity and competences in the use of participatory teaching and learning methodologies such as Participatory Rural Appraisal, action research and experiential learning?

Lessons learned from practice

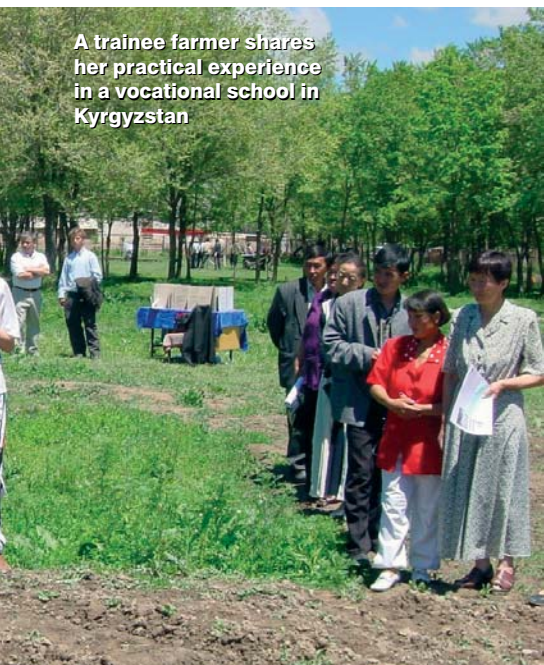
Although the challenges and constraints are real, some significant achievements have been made through support to higher learning initiatives which promote greater participation in learning and teaching.

Bridging theory and practice

Learning and teaching participation lends itself to

“ To promote participation, there is growing need for experienced people who are open to its meaning, methods and practice ”

A trainee farmer shares her practical experience in a vocational school in Kyrgyzstan



an interdisciplinary approach within which theory and practice may be integrated and rooted in local realities. A basic concept of learning and teaching participation is that individuals participate in generating theories which are relevant to their own context. These emerge through the experience of practice, and then go on to inform further practice. The relationship between theory and practice seems to work best when a variety of stakeholders are able to participate at different levels of the teaching and learning process, especially through the use of experiential learning methods and activities, and through participatory curriculum development.

Linking universities and communities

Establishing strong and participatory links between universities and communities is a key element in bridging theory with practice. While many kinds of collaboration exist with differing levels of participation, university-community engagements have the potential to bring about change at a number of levels:

- Personal: the mutual learning between academics, practitioners and students can help to re-shape conventional hierarchies and introduce new knowledges, attitudes and values into academic processes.
- Institutional: collaborations with communities can open up structural

boundaries by encouraging a cross-departmental and interdisciplinary approach to addressing community-based needs.

- Societal: university-community links can offer practitioners support and resources in identifying needs and priorities and mobilising accordingly. Collaborations are especially effective when communities take the lead in community-based research partnerships, while the role of the university is to facilitate processes, provide support and learn from practitioners.
- Global: the participation of community voices in research and development systems can help to make research far more relevant, identify gaps in existing research, and allow room for new innovations based on contextual practice.

Participatory methods for more effective learning

Experiential and learner-centred participatory teaching methods are two cornerstones of transformative learning. Employing these methods in the context of HLLs can make a significant contribution to capacity development of students, staff, practitioners and institutions as well as the creation of effective and sustainable initiatives in the community.

Experiential learning (for example through community-based research or student service-learning programmes) provides a methodology for increasing participation while prompting institutional change. Critical reflection contributes to transformation at the personal level through self evaluation, and through learning from experiences. It also helps to break down traditional roles of students and teachers, simultaneously increasing participation by involving fellow staff, students and community practitioners in the reflection.

These methodologies highlight the intrinsic link between participation in learning and transformation. The more learners participate, the more they are empowered; the more they are empowered, the more they question previous assumptions. The more they transform at the personal level, especially through changes in attitudes, values and beliefs, the greater the impact is likely to be on institutional and social transformation.

Mexico

At the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Chiapas, Mexico, a collaboration of teachers, students and graduates from different disciplines with communities, social organisations and NGOs in different activities has brought about the Interdisciplinary Research Programme on Human Development in Chiapas. The programme emphasises reconciling academic and practitioner knowledge for the benefit of mutual learning and more effective development initiatives (Carlos Cortez Ruiz).

Ethiopia

Mekelle University, Ethiopia, introduced a 'Practical Attachment' Programme whereby all students are attached for three months to different governmental and non-governmental organisations. This provides opportunities for students to realise the realities of the farming community through experiencing rural life and also enables social continuity between the university and local communities. Considerable attitudinal changes have been observed amongst students and their understanding of the realities, needs and demands of local communities is increased. Through re-entry workshops, stakeholders have a direct input into discussions about curriculum, and evaluation of learning, ensuring that the university better equips students to work with and assist local communities in solving their own problems. (Mamusha Lemma and Mitiku Haile).

Vietnam

In Vietnam, the Social Forestry Support Programme, and the Localised Poverty Reduction in Vietnam Programme (both based, respectively on networks which included five universities) combined participatory curriculum development with community-based learning approaches. This enabled experiences gained by students, teachers, government officials and members of local communities to contribute to both community-based development activities and to curriculum development, thus benefiting all parties through improved learning programmes coupled with enhanced outreach and links with poor communities. (Peter Taylor; Stefanie Scott and Truong Thi Kim Chuyen).

Strengthening the LTP dialogue

The Learning and Teaching Participation (LTP) dialogue has provided a much needed opportunity to host discussions, network and disseminate lessons learned from individual initiatives. It is also contributing to the participatory process of scaling up experiences from the grassroots level into global research agendas. The International Workshop on Learning and Teaching Participation in Higher Education resulted in the elaboration of a range of potential strategies for taking the dialogue further.

Workshop proposals and recommendations include the following:

- **Continued dissemination** of publications and resource-materials related to LTP.
- **Scaling-up, processes, methods and strategies** to ensure that local needs, priorities, knowledges, values and beliefs are feeding into the global dialogue and research agenda.
- Encouragement of **regional/national dialogues and exchanges**, including those in other languages, which can help to reconceptualise understandings of participation and learning in light of local priorities and needs.
- **Compilation of innovations, materials and approaches** from capacity-building initiatives (for example resources for curriculum development, evaluation, teaching and facilitation).

Several of these proposals are already being undertaken by 'champions' who have been willing to collaborate in pursuing the desire to bring Learning and Teaching Participation from the margins of institutional life to the centre. Hopefully others will join the initiative and help to maintain the momentum of this rich and dynamic dialogue.

Partly to test the ideas emerging from the dialogue, IDS will begin in 2004 a new MA programme for practitioners on Participation, Development and Social Change.

Moving forward

HLIs have huge potential to contribute to development and sustainable poverty alleviation. While challenges do exist, participation can be a valuable tool which enables HLIs to fulfil this role. Learning to participate requires a movement from the margins to the centre of institutions and the policy environment in which they operate. Such a movement may be facilitated and supported in the following ways:

Individuals within HLIs may explore ways of changing their practices through professional development which emphasises personal innovations in teaching and learning. Engagement in wider networking can nourish and support such endeavours.

Managers and administration staff of HLIs can recognise, support and establish innovations within their own institutions which strengthen capacity. They can share lessons learned through their personal networks and community linkages.

- **NGOs, community-based organisations and practitioners** can explore possibilities

for collaboration and joint learning with HLIs in developmental initiatives.

Donors and policy-makers can help to create an enabling environment in which these practices can flourish. They may also support capacity building at the local, national, regional or global level. These might consist of:

- Explorations into appropriate assessment and evaluation methods including participatory impact assessment.
- Contextualised approaches to learning; participatory curriculum development.
- Organisational development approaches that support and mainstream participatory and collaborative learning.
- Development of national and regional networks in ways that are appropriate to the socio-cultural context.

With this kind of support, HLIs have the opportunity to realise their developmental potential through collaborative and participatory approaches to learning.

Further reading

Peter Taylor and Jude Fransman, 2003, 'Learning and Teaching Participation in Institutions of Higher Learning'. Jude Fransman (Ed), 2003, 'Proceedings of the International Workshop on Learning and Teaching Participation', IDS. 'Learning and Teaching Participation' PLA Notes Special Edition, No.48

Website

Participation
www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/networks/learnparticip/

Credits

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