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“Humanities Across Borders” (HAB): Towards a Trans-Regional, Civic Ecology of Learning

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Abstract:

In this paper, we share our thoughts on implementing Humanities Across Borders (HAB), an initiative of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) to invigorate the Humanities with civic-minded pedagogies grounded in local experience, with university partners from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the USA. We reflect on the economisation and technologisation of higher education together with the growing dominance of a singular model of knowledge production and dissemination the world over. From there, we discuss our approach of learning *in situ*, i.e. combining the situational context – people’s memories, expressions, motives, practices and, physical surroundings – with text-based, disciplinary articulations. In visualising the university as a site of meaning-making, we call for the rehabilitation of the public role of the university even as we build a trans-regional, inter-institutional, intersectional space for collaborative teaching and learning.

Keywords: collaborative education; multi-university clusters; intersectional spaces; civic-minded pedagogies; decolonising curricula; learning *in situ*; experiential knowledge.

*“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes **the practice of freedom**, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1984).*

Introduction: Waning of the university as a civic project

In February 2020, weeks before the onset of the pandemic, the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) program of the IIAS, that commenced in 2016 with a mandate to experiment with pedagogies beyond the classroom, culminated its first phase with the release of a shared Manifesto¹, jointly written, in-person, by representatives of universities from parts of Asia and Africa, Europe, Mexico, and the USA. It is only in subsequent months, when contagion and confinement threatened to transform daily lives, inexorably and without exception, that the significance of the university as a dynamic site of knowledge and meaning-making, including the risks it faced of its own dissolution, became an urgent and necessary question for many academics.

We open the discussion with Philippe Peycam’s reflections in his editorial to the spring 2021 issue of the IIAS Newsletter, titled “Imagining the university in the post-COVID world”, triggered by an article by Rohan D’Souza that appeared in June 2020, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic (Peycam 2021, 3). We are confronted by a tendency towards the economisation of higher education which, according to D’Souza, is evident in the current struggle between three university paradigms: (1) *the “Humboldtian” model*, built around an originally elite, turned democratic, idea of making students into “citizens” by fostering their reasoning powers in an environment of academic freedom; (2) *the neoliberal model*, heir to the post-War phenomenon of democratising higher education, based on a politically restrictive and economically utilitarian understanding that education must amount to preparing students as clients for the labour market; (3) and the irrepressible rise, both as continuity and rupture of the latter, of *EduTech university platforms*, where credit-based online education-certification for users does away with the experience of in-person learning altogether.

This description lays bare, the potential tensions between three emergent ideal types – the student-citizen, the customer-consumer and, the user-student – inhabiting virtual and physical spaces of higher learning today. For D’Souza, it is the battle between these value-imbued paradigms, together with the blatant ascendancy of the economic over the civic and political, that will determine the future of higher learning (D’Souza 2020). Following the COVID 19 outbreak,

¹The full text of the HAB Manifesto is available at <https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/sites/default/files/hab-manifesto.pdf>

D'Souza warns of the possibility of an irreversible trend towards the disappearance of most physical universities as more and more universities across the globe find ways to justify online education. Even as students and faculty strained to imagine the future of then deserted campuses in the post-COVID world, many, especially administrators of influential institutions in the global North, began peddling an acceleration of the use of virtual instruments and online teaching and learning environments, which were already on the rise with the advent of e-learning, MOOCs, and other open universities since the early 2000s.²

Although both advocates and antagonists of remote classroom teaching noted that the mass migration to online platforms would sharpen and reproduce existing cleavages between academia and society at large, they nevertheless articulated the problem narrowly as the lack of technical resources. According to this formulation, COVID 19 put a spotlight on “inadequate information technology infrastructure, limited expertise for online teaching and learning methods and the inability of institutions to provide computers and data to students” (Kupe and Wangenge-Ouma 2020) for many administrators. The pandemic then became an occasion, and opportunity, to surmount these challenges and to embrace techno-innovations in educational “delivery and access using a hybrid or blended education strategy”. Currently, the dominant higher education bandwagon worldwide, much like the purveyors of development in the 20th century, sees technology as a panacea for many expected outcomes – creativity, innovation for economic growth, excellence in teaching inputs and learning outputs, employment readiness – of the time spent at a university.

When EduTech reaches maturity, D'Souza predicts, it will no longer operate within a cycle of semesters at a physical campus. Instead, he envisions students learning more and more through online connections from anywhere in the world, each aspiring to accrue notable certifications via *à la carte* courses from renowned universities and streamed by a few big platforms. These platforms will attract much larger numbers of online students without the hard costs of maintaining buildings, libraries or a vast number of employees, faculty included. Quite naturally, as already the case for

² In a 1999 Report titled “Technology Transfer: The U.S. Experience”, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom see technology transfer in higher education as a “public duty, [with] income generation, wider benefits for the university, [and] contribution to economic growth” (in Miyoshi 2001, 674–675).

other service businesses, we may see algorithm-operated platforms like Amazon or Google forge working alliances with a handful of prestigious university names – turned into certification brands – to lead the train to comprehensive digital education in what is being called the “platform economy”. This new paradigm is based on the same competitive utilitarian ideology as the corporate university but corresponds to a next level of infiltration of for-profit principles of productivity and efficiency within academe. Here, computing platforms virtually aggregate transactions between clients (the students) and providers (universities), thereby bypassing the traditional (public) role of the latter.

Neo-liberalism is advancing a dystopian trend in its drive for efficient knowledge delivery, where students and teachers are discrete elements within a technology-induced distance education provision. The detachment of the physical grounding of the learning process, devoid of the sensory experience of the act of imbibing in a specified context (time and space), whilst interacting with others, portends a dehumanisation, and gradual depletion of the university as a brick-and-mortar campus and its associated collegiality. On the other hand, many city-based universities are transforming their urban-embedded academic milieu to suit the demands of their business consultants in favour of campus real-estate development and gentrification.³ The logic undergirding urban expansion and personalised digital learning environments (DLE), excludes informal, shared public spaces necessary for intellectual growth and community building for students and scholars.

In questioning the underlying substratum of EduTech, and far from painting a bleak future, we are concerned about the way knowledge is fast becoming a commodity and, the process of learning, a technology-led transfer, training and, transaction via the worldwide web. The COVID 19 crisis has revealed the prime significance of the campus-based university in facilitating inter-personal teaching and learning relationships and sustaining vertical and horizontal knowledge communities. Unless there is a concerted momentum towards bold and self-conscious reckoning, virtual universities may well become the Trojan horse of higher education. It is ironic that before the 20th

³ Columbia University in New York is a good example. The clash between town and gown in European university towns was discussed at a roundtable that included social housing residents of the town of Leiden, Leiden university officials, and urban scholars, held as part of a week-long *in situ* graduate school of the HAB program (Jacob 2019, 46-47).

century, universities were not significant nationally, but today they are “closely wedded to the fortunes of the 20th century’s dominant social form, national capitalism, that attempt to control money and markets” (Hart 2004, 19).

A call for a more grounded, self-reflective, and collaborative approach to higher education is thus in sharp contrast to the call to action that reverberated two decades ago, when universities across the world were exhorted to take on globalisation as a new moral responsibility. Paradoxically, fulfilling the university’s civic role of enhancing people’s meaningfulness in life was reduced to livelihood enhancement demanding a practical outreach and integration within the global economy. In Latin America, for instance, universities were seen as drivers of economic, cultural, and environmental development:

As a centre for the generation of knowledge the university has the strategic compromise to transform its immediate and mediate environment, in order to permanently improve the quality of life of the population, which must be understood not only as an answer to the people’s demands for goods and services but also to promote cultural development and conservation and improvement of the environment. Besides, the university must assume responsibility for the insertion of the different local, regional and national sectors of the economy into the international markets (Romero 2010, 141–151).

This was when university-based incubators became the alleged drivers of innovation, forging linkages between research laboratories and businesses, supported by public and private funds, including university funds.⁴ Describing the recent disruption to higher education in the US as a “sledgehammer” Snyder (2020) expects the virus accelerating “a number of troubling longer-term trends including public disinvestment in state colleges and universities, a growing gap between higher ed haves and have-nots, and the migration of courses and degrees online” (2). In the present,

⁴ Working as a sociologist at a university-based technology-business incubator in south India, Aarti’s reflection on how an information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) project was transformed into a “rural-inclusive” for-profit company, reveals the contradictions of public-private partnerships following the neo-liberal wave in India (Kawlra 2013, 39-51).

visibly fragile, not yet post, pandemic world, there is an urgent need for life-affirming learning grounded in real world matters.

Can we jointly resist isolationist, socio-technical and market-oriented imaginaries and, instead, think about universities as a much-needed place, not only of social mobility and intellectual growth but also, of humane belonging and shared purpose?

In this paper, we share our thoughts on implementing Humanities Across Borders (HAB), an initiative of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) to invigorate the Humanities with civic-minded pedagogies grounded in local experience, with university partners from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the USA. We do so first, through a critical analysis of the physicality of the university as a performative site of knowledge construction, hierarchisation and fragmentation, and imagine its potential as a site for meaning-making. Second, we reflect upon our experience of building a trans-regional network and platform for locally grounded education collaboration. The section on putting context back in academic practice constitutes one of HAB's ultimate objectives, all in all meant to re-position the university as a public civic actor in its own right. The concluding section reiterates how the pandemic induced rupture in quotidian academic practice is an occasion for a pause to rethink systemic inequities in the dominant model that pervades higher education today.

Visualising the university as a site of meaning-making

The Euro-American university model, even in its benevolent expression, suffered from an original hubris reinforced in the twentieth century by the post-cold war victory of the West. In a recent book titled *Knowledge Worlds: Media, Materiality, and the Making of The Modern University*, Reinhold Martin (2021) describes that colleges and universities were consolidated as a modern paradigm of knowledge production and reproduction in the West from the 1800s with claims to universality. Western universities continue to bask in the presumption that they are global knowledge repositories and exemplars of excellence in the world, encapsulating all that was considered valuable enough to know and transmit. This self-representation as holders of ultimate wisdom, has crystallised over the past century into a reproduceable paradigm of ivory tower higher education made conspicuous, not only for creating a global knowledge elite but also, for its academic imperialism. This is demonstrated unequivocally for the UK by Andy Beckett (2017) who, in his article "PPE: the Oxford degree that runs Britain", suggests that holders of the Oxford PPE believe that they "can and should improve Britain and the wider world". Speaking of Indian

Universities, the charge of academic imperialism is explicit in the article published by Claude Alvares (2011). He proposes a critical absorption with indigenous intellectual traditions to counter the Eurocentrism of the borrowed social science curriculum in which “not just the content but even the assumptions and methodologies have been uncritically imported from the European academic tradition” (72). In Mexico, Genner Llanes-Ortiz (2009) speaks of the ways in which Intercultural and Indigenous Universities (IIU) are emerging as part of the newest social movements demanding a decolonising of knowledge production away from the dominant Western university model.

Reflections on the persistent unevenness of education justice at the global level is not new. For radical educationist and sociologist Florestan Fernandes, the university was unequivocally an *institutional* project of *desenvolvimento* or “development” within a broader geo-political, colonial, or postcolonial context. Speaking of the Brazilian situation, he argued that the university did not emerge “like the world itself and for itself, from pedagogical reflection. But as a historical social reality [...]. In terms of lineage, our ‘university’ lays its historical, cultural, and pedagogical roots in European institutional model [...]. This perspective is essential if the intention is, in fact, to explain, correct, and guide the rhythms of this institution” (Fernandes 2008, 172). This means that it is possible to view universities not as towering edifices of knowledge dissemination but just simply as institutional articulations for the transformation of society through education.

It also means acknowledging the ongoing rupture and estrangement of university campuses from their local milieu, be it social, political, historical, or spatial. In some universities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, the United States, a land acknowledgement is made on their website, and sometimes even in syllabi and faculty email signatures, as a mark of respect and reparation vis á vis the indigenous peoples who once occupied the site on which the university stands.⁵ This institutional recognition, if often verging on the side of tokenism, nonetheless brings to the fore the question of the university campus’, often silenced, past. It also, at least potentially, links the campus to the neighbourhood beyond the university walls. Viewing the university as a dynamic and locally embedded place with its own history-of-making, allows students to situate themselves

⁵ University of Washington, USA for instance, articulated their land acknowledgement during the pandemic (<https://www.lib.washington.edu/gmm/constitution/land-acknowledgement>) or University of Winnipeg, Canada (<https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/indigenous/land-acknowledgement.html>)

in the campus environment and to delve into their own narratives of self-identification. The removal of Mahatma Gandhi's statue from the University of Ghana's campus in Accra by students and faculty is one such example (BBC News 2018). Campuses provide students a uniquely inclusive and egalitarian public space for the expression of democratic values, and this comes to the fore when their walls and spaces for convening are curtailed or shut down.⁶ Viewing the campus and neighbourhood as a site of meaning-making situates the academic practice of students, teachers and, administrators within a wider public pedagogy and “translate private worries into public concerns and collective struggle” (Giroux 2004, 73–89).

Reflecting upon the future of the university in the current context of the upsurge of populist nationalisms and ecological emergencies worldwide, was the theme of the 5th annual conference of the Amsterdam Centre of Globalisation Studies (ACGS) held in 2018, in collaboration with HAB and IIAS. Titled *Global Critical Pedagogies*, the conference brought scholars from all over the world to discuss academic ontologies along four interrelated themes namely, pedagogies beyond the classroom; decolonising knowledge and worlding pedagogies; contesting the neoliberal university; and pedagogies of failure.⁷

In 2020, just before the pandemic started, keeping the political goal of transformation in contemporary higher education in mind, members of the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) consortium, reiterated their common vision of a context-embedded academic practice in the Preamble of a jointly written Manifesto for rethinking classroom pedagogies and disciplinary boundaries as follows:⁸

Our goal, as educators and institutions, is to identify and explore the expansive variety of modes and contexts of acting, in and on the world. We propose to create border-crossing spaces within and outside universities where academics, students, and

⁶ Graffiti on Kashmiri Gate Campus of the Ambedkar University, Delhi image is part of a series of photographs taken between August 2018- October 2019 and shared at an Academic Freedom meeting in 2021. This graffiti was whitewashed by the administration soon after (see Jayanti 2021).

⁷ <https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/events/global-critical-pedagogies-fifth-annual-acgs-conference>

⁸ <https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/sites/default/files/hab-manifesto.pdf>

communities learn from, and act and work with, each other, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and recognition.

In the first phase of HAB, we explored how place-based methodologies offer linkages with local actors, and provide opportunities for generating experiential knowledge, otherwise relegated to the margins as non-expert knowledge. The HAB Manifesto articulates the members' shared pedagogical values of critical thinking, deep listening, and collective immersion at a time when remote learning is fast becoming the norm. The HAB Consortium of member institutions from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, have also agreed to collaborate over the coming years to build a common set of civic-minded pedagogies to be delivered via multi-university clusters of teaching and learning.⁹ As university administrators seek the means to reach out globally, if not to counter the acceleration of distance education described above, especially at a time when the study abroad model was retrenched because of the pandemic, a trans-regional collaborative network such as HAB has proved to be invaluable.

Building a trans-regional platform for locally grounded education collaboration

Since 2016, HAB has morphed into a community of like-minded scholars and academic administrators. The original ambition (and vision) of the program was that of forging a new pedagogical platform of an expanded – locally grounded, globally connected – Humanities, supported by a vibrant collective of individuals and institutions of higher learning sharing its core objectives. Indeed, a first step into the program was to forge direct and indirect intra and inter-regional connections across regions and continents. The consortium's potential to support civically grounded, humanist approaches in unstable political contexts was high-lighted a few years ago by Abdourahmane Seck of the University of Gaston Berger, Saint Louis, Senegal:

The public disaffection toward the allocation of resources to the human and social sciences translates into incessant tremors within academic spaces whose functions are no longer legible or visible, leading to a crisis in their links with the communities in which they evolve. The vulnerability of our education institutions has been

⁹ Drawing from Lave and Wenger's idea of "situated learning" i.e., learning as a social process within an existing community of practice, with strong global, intra- and inter-regional, ties (Lave and Wenger 1991).

exacerbated by the circulation of models brought about by reforms, of which Senegal was an experimental field in 1992. For the most part, they have resulted in a series of blank or invalidated years throughout the sub-region showing both the great determination of nation-states to neutralise university spaces and the extreme nature of the pressures they were undergoing from their donors (Seck 2020, unpublished presentation at the HAB meeting at Chiang Mai).

In March, before India moved into a national lockdown, HAB facilitated a meeting between Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, a new member, with administrators and faculty of long-term partners, Ambedkar University in Delhi (AUD). This meeting was important because it was one of the first steps toward the concretization of the type of multi-university pedagogical collaboration, envisaged for the second phase of HAB. Sean Decatur, President of Kenyon College, succinctly articulated what he viewed to be HAB's core action: "it is in a sense, that of moving institutions, because if institutions begin to change the way they think about knowledge production and dissemination, then this doesn't become an added element, but the core of what institutions do."¹⁰ In May 2022, when travel was finally possible, a group of HAB partners visited Kenyon and experienced first-hand its beautiful campus environment and innovative liberal arts under-graduate program. The visit coincided with the publication of Sean Decatur's reflection of his position as President of Kenyon in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Included here is an extract from the piece titled "The Cost of Leading While Black" in the Chronicle of Higher Education:

I have been asked over the years by well-intentioned white acquaintances whether I see myself as a college president or a Black college president. My racial identity, like all aspects of my experience, is not something from which I can (or would want to) separate. It informs the way I see the world, the way I teach, the way I lead. But the question itself inverts the reality of the lived experience of Black Americans. I know, and my colleagues know, that I will be *seen* as a Black president, regardless of how I define or describe myself (Decatur 2022, 3).

¹⁰ Recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

We were struck by the parallels of higher education in the USA with those of universities in the global South. Namely, how disassociated the content of university education is from the lived experience in which it is practiced.

HAB partners at the Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD), Chiang Mai University, Thailand, have demonstrated that their long-term engagement with a community residing in a National Forest Reservation in Chiang Rai province can support their struggle to continue shifting cultivation practices and right to live in the forest. Working with the youth of this community to study their own history and everyday knowledge and practices related to traditional rice cultivation (*Rai Mun Vien*), has helped them collectively stand up against government policies aimed at replacing hill rice farming with permanent cash crop cultivation as has already been done among other ethnic highland communities in Northern Thailand.

Similarly, in India, HAB has worked with the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK), of AUD in addressing the disconnect between the university and its expanding urban and peri-urban environment in Delhi. Their bottom-up approach to history of the city, not through those who have held power in this national capital but, via its neighbourhood resident associations, is now emerging as a model for community-engaged methodologies in the wider network of HAB partners. In India's Northeast, HAB has supported Cotton University, Assam, and the Heritage Publishing House in the publication of a *Handbook of Naga women's voices and visions* (Moral and Tzudir 2022), an anthology of Naga women writers "who find safe space to contain their shame, anger, despair and the hope to reclaim and rebuild their identities" through their stories (28).

In South India, HAB has focused on people's everyday life-experiences as a research and pedagogical strategy to conduct collaborative pedagogical events like the "Storytelling and Writing" workshop at the Madras Institute for Development Studies in Chennai (December 2019) together with HAB partners from Kenyon and AUD. At the French Institute (IFP) in Pondicherry, the workshop on "Youth Aspirations and Anxieties in Contemporary India", (November 2022) and the "Writing without Fear" workshop (March 2023), were occasions to bring scholars from France, in addition to young scholars from Tamil Nadu and other parts of India, into the network.

In East Asia, the continued involvement of Taipei National University for the Arts (TNUA) is now regionally connected by two other strategic members: Kyoto Seika University in Japan, and

Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), in Singapore. HAB was also approached by a network of educators from Mexico, themselves associated with the country's unique "indigenous higher education system". El Colegio de Mexico, with its Centre for Asian and African Studies, intends to serve as an interface between the Mexican local academic system and the rest of the network. A similar role can be found in three designated Area Studies institutions of the network, for the role they can play within their own eco-systems connecting with Asia and Africa respectively: Northern Illinois University's Centre for Southeast Asian Studies in the US, IIAS, and its location within Leiden University in the Netherlands, and the Centre for African Studies, at the University of Basel, Switzerland.

In West Africa, HAB embarked upon setting up a regional platform comprising of both Anglophone and Francophone partners (Houssouba 2017). At the Institute of Humanities in Bamako, Mali there has been some progress since 2017, but working with the Institute of Social Studies (INSS) Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, given the context of its political instability and the impossibility of travel and in-person exchanges has not been without its challenges. In 2022, HAB co-organised a workshop titled "Craft as Method" with the Groupe d'Action et d'Etude Critique (GAEC-Africa) in Saint Louis, Senegal and the Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ghana, Legon. The workshop was successful, not only in blurring the boundaries between the knowhow of craft practice and expert knowledge on crafts but also in reiterating HAB's focus on decolonising knowledge through civically engaged, trans-regional connections, and collaborations across the Africa-Asia axis of knowledge.

Putting "context" back in academic practice

HAB's approach of combining contextual knowledge – people's memories, experiences, and embodied practices – with conventional education in a collaborative milieu, is an original way to encourage teaching and research that is sensitive to one's immediate environmental, social, and economic contingencies or urgencies, whilst attending to the flows and constraints of the broader global setting. For example, the roundtable "Place, Practice and Nature: Indigo", brought together many HAB scholars at the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) in Leiden, in July 2019 to shed light on the versatility of indigo for its uses in Asia and Africa. While in both continents the plant has a long history of use in dyeing, it was evident that state narratives and policy trajectories were vastly different in each of the cases presented. The meeting illustrated the

need to collaborate at regional and trans-regional levels to build a shared academic forum that would surpass disciplinary compartmentalisation in the study of indigo. HAB partners at Mali, at the ISH in Bamako, who had so far primarily explored the indigo plant through geographical surveys, discovered the potential of the plant as a dye, an embodied cultural and linguistic practice, community identity and craft heritage. Seeing the role played by public universities in India, Taiwan, and Thailand in supporting artisans was particularly eye opening for colleagues from Mali. HAB meetings have triggered questions about a shift in orientation in ISH's research on Malian indigo and artisanal textiles and to open dialogue with other partners in the West Africa region along the question of migration of communities of practice and, with partners in Asia and Europe, on broader issues of heritage and sustainable development.

Similarly, the trans-regional discussions along the four HAB themes or sites of knowledge and meaning – Food, Place, Craft and Word – have yielded interesting comparisons, connections, and collaborations across the network. The HAB roundtables at ICAS 12 on food, indigo, rice, intersectional pedagogies, and place-making are examples of the creative interactions and sustained relationships that have been forged with partners since 2016. Most recently, HAB has supported the “Academic Freedom Space” created by alumni and research fellows of the IAS to offer them space to showcase their audio-visual stories under the “Campus Speaks” outreach at the ICAS 12 this year. This has been a meaningful partnership in sharing experiences of scholars from conflict regions or authoritarian regimes, where freedom of expression has been severely curtailed in universities, as in Myanmar, India, Hong Kong to name just a few.¹¹ The threat to academic freedom, it is worth recognising, is not limited to the politics of authoritarian rulers, states, or political parties. The EduTech wave is itself a serious, and arguably, much more massive,

¹¹ “The attacks on intellectual freedom in recent years by the Indian state as well as by political activists have been documented in a set of six tables compiled by the faculty and students of the department of sociology in Delhi University. These are 1. Censorship of books and interference with university syllabi; 2. Denial of permission, disruption of seminars/meetings/events on campus; 3. Arrest of faculty/criminal charges against faculty and arrest of students; 4. Physical attacks on faculty and students; 5. Termination/suspension/ ‘resignation’ of faculty, and suspension of students; 6. Denial of research visas/restrictions on academic exchanges” (Guha 2022).

and globally powerful threat to academic freedom within the most liberal U.S. and European/U.K. universities. It has facilitated the refusal of tenure to dissident professors, suppression of texts that offend nationalist sentiments etc., whilst insidiously disregarding approaches that do not fit the neoliberal utilitarian matrix.

These initiatives, and many others supported by HAB in effect, aim at truly decolonising the academy, beyond the cosmetic rhetoric now widely used by both scholars and institutions. In her piece titled “Why Does Area Studies Need Decolonization?” HAB affiliate historian of Myanmar, Tharaphi Than reiterates the value of academic activism underpinning HAB methodologies:

Using rice, indigo, and words as an intervention or research lens, local scholars and students are empowered and shown ways to document, narrate, and share their local communities to the rest of the world. When they are writing about food—be it a chewing betel or common tea-leaf salad—students are freed from the burden of getting the history right, as one History student in Myanmar, puts it. Such new methods and methodologies should be welcomed and, in fact institutionalized, by the global North. Decolonizing curricula and area studies can start from small steps. One such step is lifting the burden of mastering the canons or mimicking the West (Than 2021).

Than’s point is to bring to the fore the question of whose history, and to challenge established priorities and definitions within disciplines, especially those that deem them automatically superior.

In what follows we attempt a description of how HAB links academe to society by facilitating spaces of interaction, deliberation and dialogue beyond the classroom at three related levels: i) “Trans-regional academic network”, at the level of the consortium and beyond to a wider academic community, articulated as shared activities and exchanges between partners, their students, teachers and administrators, to forge long lasting collaborations in curricula development; ii) “Civic-minded pedagogies”, at the level of the local host institutions and, ideally, involving students, faculty from across the disciplines, administrators, governmental and community actors that are part of the host institution’s campus and neighbourhood milieu and, iii) “Multi-university clusters”, both at regional and trans-regional levels comprising HAB member institutions who are interested in formally inserting the pedagogies developed at HAB into their educational programs.

HAB supports its members not only to sustain trans-regional, interdisciplinary dialogues but also to work with agents of social action and change, like artists, activists, craft practitioners, public intellectuals in their respective local contexts. Grounding pedagogic practice within a specific context, is a way of bringing meaning to the learning process, as well as an opportunity for vastly diverse actors and viewpoints to come together in conversation with one another. At each of these meetings we have seen how learning occurs through immersion, making, or doing. Most importantly, it shifts attention away from the teacher/student binary as the focal point of expertise/learning and situates the interaction within a new set of relations, each with their own power dynamics.¹² These spaces and collaborative processes facilitating academe-society dialogue are now part of HAB's pedagogical tool kit to support educators to situate their immediate environment at the core of the learning experience, and to bring locally held concerns in the here and now, into dialogue with wider issues in the present, as well as in the past. Described here as protocols for collaborative teaching and learning, many features of these formats are often combined or merged in practice, depending upon the context at hand.

In Situ Graduate Schools (ISGS): These are field-based graduate schools conducted at a partner identified urban or peri-urban location to implement context-specific pedagogies. The idea is to use the field-site as both the text and the context of knowledge, where educators and students from partner universities of the network can test situated learning in a third cultural-linguistic-politico-economic context, with the facilitation of a local partner institution. The five day In Situ Graduate School (ISGS) entitled "Reading Leiden" brought to life HAB's place-based pedagogies for young researchers from the HAB network. Here students *read* the city of Leiden through an animated town vs. gown debate between university officials and residents of a social housing complex; experienced the sights, sounds and flavours of the Saturday market, local brewery, weaver's studio, and other places where they had opportunities for face-to-face interaction and hands-on experience.

¹² "Pedagogy is always about power because it cannot be separated from how subjectivities are formed, desires are mobilized, some experiences are legitimated and others are not or how some knowledge is considered acceptable while other forms are excluded from the curriculum" (Giroux 2020, 7).

Policy Roundtables (PRT): These are meetings that have the specific aim to come to some sort of consent for collective action on a locally framed problem among multiple stakeholders and scholars. The workshop “Re-imagining the civic role of the University”, was to deliberate upon the public role of universities in Myanmar that was neither directed by state-driven national policies nor trainings conducted by visiting faculty from foreign universities. It was the first time that Mandalay University had hosted an event at which artists, poets, activists, journalists, could sit together with academics to discuss matters of curricula and pedagogies around common concerns pertaining to gender inequality, freedom of expression, land-use, and educational reforms in Myanmar (Kawlra 2017, 46-47). Similarly, at the HAB roundtable “An Inter-community dialogue” between farmers with small and big holdings, local historians, governmental agriculture extension workers, heritage professionals and scholars, held in Kokrajhar, Assam, for instance, a long drawn ethnic conflict was set aside to discuss rice in all its manifestations – varieties, cultivation practices, cultural values (Narzary 2019, 51). In this way roundtables connect scholars directly with local activists and community-based practitioners as well as activists with a view towards concrete policy action and change.

Practice-based Workshops (PBW): Typically, these are occasions for collective work in a particular craft or material skill. They are anchored within issues or themes deriving from the local contexts in which they are conducted. At the “Indigo as critical pedagogy” workshop held in Taipei, not only was the experiential component of learning brought to the fore. Here members of the HAB network as well as local indigo artists, designers and artisans had the opportunity to handle indigo, comprehend its material qualities through the five senses. The workshop was an occasion to discuss the many ways in which the revival of indigo as minority cultural heritage is underway in Taiwan and to compare it with movements in India, Thailand, Japan, and parts of West Africa (Chiang 2019, 52). At the HAB “Storytelling and Writing” workshop initiated by Kenyon College, Ohio, and held at the Madras Institute for Development Studies (MIDS), Chennai, students and faculty of MIDS, HAB scholars and local media professionals and activists shared techniques of narrating complex issues of caste and gender in Tamil Nadu in a free and candid atmosphere.

Pop-up local Museum: Moving from authorised sources of history to people’s memories, narratives, objects, relations, feelings and motives, the idea of the pop-up museum is to use the place-based approach to involve residents of neighbourhoods in self-representation exercises and

to help write their own histories of migration and settlement. The “Neighbourhood Museum” at CCK works with different neighbourhoods in Delhi, to support a local event accompanied by an exhibition and public memory sharing forum. These pop-up museums or travelling exhibits must be created with and appropriated by the local community or taken on by local authorities as has been done for the Delhi City Museum with its umbilical connection with CCK-AUD or those facilitated by practicums of urban renewal in heritage neighbourhoods by many universities in Taiwan.

Dialogue Forum & Fair: The idea of a dialogue forum and fair is to build and support a network of diverse stakeholders on a range of local or regional products and skills, such as food and cultivation practices with a view to generate awareness about local traditions, resources, and concerns. The Street Food Festival held in Saint Louis, Senegal, and the Food Forum & Fair in Pondicherry, are examples of open dialogue platforms for researchers to discuss issues of food sovereignty and sustainability among the various stakeholders including farmers groups, local governments, retailers, and consumers both urban and rural (Besnier 2022; Guetat-Bernard and Govindan n.d.). We believe that such civically embedded dialogues serve to create more structural connections in the region and deepen the engagement between local universities and their surroundings and eventually be adopted as a curricular component of the university.

Student publications/media outputs: AUD encourages students working among local communities to publish or make films based on their research among local communities as a gesture of reciprocity. An example of this comes from our partners at the Centre for Community Knowledge who supported a student of Social Design to extend her engagement with Afghan women in Delhi with an illustrated book titled, *Afghan Communities in Delhi – A Primer*, featuring twenty-five words from their daily lives that they felt readers should know in the spirit of mutual co-existence in the vast city of Delhi.

By way of a coda: Rehabilitating the public role of the university

One point that we would like to reiterate is that the civic-minded, collaborative approach being proposed here does not correspond to the one-sided public outreach programs and incubators of many universities. Far from it. HAB advocates the dynamic inclusion of the university into the social, economic, cultural environment, of which it is a part, to forge a kind of learning ecology from which broader questions and processes are comprehended. Paying close attention to the role

played by strategic spaces located at the interstices of academe and society, and upholding these intersectional spaces that operate as effective clearing houses and catalysts of change within local epistemic ecologies, have been the focus of experimentation at HAB which, in turn, draws upon Philippe's long experience of program and institution-building.¹³ IAS has long intervened within the spaces of global academia in rethinking Area Studies and redirecting scholarly practices in the field, particularly along the Asia-Africa axis of knowledge. IAS has also made innovations in academic practice a conscious goal. For instance, by re-visiting the canons of the academic conference to embed it in the social milieu in which it takes place or by doing away with keynote, especially if they are set up as an address at plenary sessions that give priority to a single scholar or perspective within the framework of an otherwise democratically organised academic event (Peycam 2019). These endeavours, even if at times constrained by institutional bureaucracies and border thinking, have come close to fostering dynamic, intersectional spaces for dialogue and collective change.

Those who inhabit these spaces most probably are scholar-administrator-activists, all of them with their own story of becoming an effective outlier within their own societal contexts. Each bringing with them their own unexpected, oftentimes transgressive strategy(s), including both successes and failures, as a critical expression of the academe-society linkage. It is through these interstitial spaces and individuals who venture to inhabit them, that one can imagine embedding higher education institutions within their social matrices, each consisting of a set of ingredients, itineraries, and intentions.

To view the university as a *real* place engendering a wider ecology of learning, whilst in dialogue with others in different regions of the world, then is a powerful way to rethink what is meant by connectivity, collaboration, and comparison. The HAB approach, if consciously observed, bears the potential for re-positioning the university in the larger picture of social-political dynamic within national or regional communities. Universities, when themselves comprehended as sites of

¹³Philippe Peycam played a key role in the establishment of a post-conflict, post-colonial, academic-cultural hybrid organisation in Cambodia, namely the Centre for Khmer Studies whose establishment, against numerous Western-originated institutional odds, is narrated in a recent publication, *Cultural Renewal in Cambodia, Academic Activism in the Neoliberal Era*, Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2020.

meaning-making, and no less mediatory than other agents of society, can forge linkages, build mindsets, and spread knowledge to counter the deleterious forces unleashed by the market that fragment work and life, alienate one individual from another and, with it, destroy the social contract upon which democracy is founded.

This clarion call is for universities to cease to easily succumb to temptations of capital and power that have divided society between the successful and those who are labelled, by contrast, as failures. Speaking of the “slow death of the university”, Terry Eagleton is deeply critical of the corporate reincarnation of the university:

Education should indeed be responsive to the needs of society. But this is not the same as regarding yourself as a service station for neocapitalism. In fact, you would tackle society’s needs a great deal more effectively were you to challenge this whole alienated model of learning. Medieval universities served the wider society superbly well, but they did so by producing pastors, lawyers, theologians, and administrative officials who helped to sustain church and state, not by frowning upon any form of intellectual activity that might fail to turn a quick buck (Eagleton 2015, 5).

HAB experiments and methodologies have shown that universities, as civic agents, can generate genuine democratic cohesion, reclaim their public role, and disentangle their institutional matrix from the pretensions of a colonial past and the grip of an over-capitalised present.

The pandemic has shown that we live in an interconnected, complex world, in which human-nature relations and the different forms of knowledge drawn from them are all entangled. It is now understood that the virus is a consequence of relentless encroachments by humans on the environment and its biodiversity. Is it possible then to renounce behaviours undergirded by anthropo-ethno-cultural provincialisms, along with neoliberal humanly regressive obsessions, and to imagine a more sober, anchored, multi-centred, horizontal, and inclusive experience of academic life? One that combines collective activities embedded in our local environment (human and natural), in dialogue with colleagues from other learning ecologies in the world, for a mutually beneficial co-created educational and research process. This *modus operandi* certainly makes use of online support, but without falling prey to EduTech platforms and their economic logic, or having to lose the human, critical and civic, dimension of education.

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