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Learning from the South: Insights for the UK from the transformation of higher education in South Africa

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We are trapped in the hegemonic belief that ideas that generate innovation in higher education travel in a one-way direction from rich western countries to the global South, a belief that has been entrenched by funding arrangements, material and discursive power relations and global policy regimes. Drawing from CGHE project 1.6 on South African undergraduate education and the public good, this presentation aims to balance this one-way flow of ideas. This is a timely and necessary shift for a number of reasons. First, China and other non-western countries' growing global influence, together with the extended reach of global corporations, have created a critical disruption in the hierarchical order of nations traditionally dominated by western powers (Marginson, 2018).¹ Second, complex patterns of societal inequality which are being reproduced across the north-south divide and multiplying in the richest countries in the world (Piketty, 2014),² are being replicated in Anglo-Saxon higher education systems through escalating stratification and inequality. While the extent of disadvantage and its challenges in South African higher education remain proportionately different to the UK, the presentation will argue that it is precisely the sheer scale of inequality in South Africa and the high visibility of the challenges unleashed, that creates fertile ground for innovative policy interventions to emerge. The presentation will outline innovations identified in the research project which aim to combat existing inequalities of access and success such as contextualised admissions, a flexible and extended undergraduate curriculum, the linking of quality with equity, and the ways in which universities have engaged with students in their demand for the decolonization of higher education (Ashwin and Case, 2018).³ The presentation will also discuss the extent to which the idea of the university as an agent of social transformation continues to be kept alive by key actors in South Africa and how this influences policy renewal. Insights from Latin American will be compared with South Africa to develop conceptual and empirical insights for the contribution of higher education to inclusive development in the North and the South. While policy learning across countries must always take full cognizance of political, economic and cultural differences, and while the challenges faced in South Africa and Latin America have yet to be overcome, the policy interventions presented nevertheless highlight the shortcomings of neoliberal reforms, and serve to open up space to imagine alternative policy responses to some of the challenges faced in UK higher education. At the same time, the presentation will also highlight how the UK project researchers drew on UK and international research to illuminate policy 'blind spots' for South Africa.