Multilateralism, Systems Thinking, Education

The Dilemmas of Higher Education and the Case for a Meta-University

Opinion piece

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The Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) is a consortium of leading research universities around the Pacific Ocean that fosters dialogue and cooperation in education, research, and public policy across one of the world's largest macroregions.

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The past 20 years have witnessed a significant transformation of universities to embrace corporate social responsibility and sustainable development, both in response to accelerated global change and public critique of the relevance of universities (for recent overviews, see Tauginienė and Pučėtaitė 2021; Filho, Lange Salvia and Brandli, 2021). The rise of significant transnational efforts in these areas signals a new historical phase and a new kind of global university engagement. This tendency, spurred significantly by the declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals framework by the United Nations in 2015, has been mirrored by the establishment of a new type of specialized university alliances, such as the *Talloires Network of Engaged Universities*[1] (est. 2011). Such networks prioritize social and environmental issues in contrast with the traditional core areas of research, education, and academic mobility.

A competing concept to that of a network was introduced in 2007 by former MIT President Charles Vest who coined the term "meta-university" for distributed and decentralized networks of universities (Vest, 2007). These meta-universities would share scholarship in physical and virtual spaces to increase access, affordability, and learning effectiveness both for personal development and for societal impact. Providing wider access to quality education is the prevailing objective of current regional versions of the meta-university in India,[2] Africa,[3] and Europe.[4]

Farber, Melton, and Alger (2020) describe the meta-university differently through the lens of a 'value net', picturing

market relationships between the center of a network (such as the meta-university) and other stakeholders. Beyond expanded access to education, the meta-university would also be a catalyst for new systems thinking, whereby different perspectives are integrated into a higher, general level of understanding of complex systems. In a recent assessment of the meta-university concept with an equal focus on access to education and the solution of global problems, Costanza, Kubiszewski, Kompas, and Sutton (2021) posit that "building a global collaborative consortium of universities and other educational institutions can move this agenda forward". Strikingly, neither paper mentions any of the existing university consortia as models, precursors, or approximations of meta-universities. Using the example of the *Association of Pacific Rim Universities* (APRU), a large consortium of leading research universities in the Asia-Pacific, this article will demonstrate that this alliance presents the key characteristics of a meta-university that facilitates both education and systems thinking through a multilateral

»The Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) embodies a meta-university facilitating education and systems thinking through a multilateral value net.«

value net. I will then look at the solutions (value propositions) such a meta-university offers to the 'three dilemmas' and the 'emerging challenges' recently outlined by Simon Marginson (2024).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF A UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE

The Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) was established in 1997 to be a platform of dialogue and collaboration that could bypass geopolitical tensions. With currently 62 member universities across 19 economies of the Asia-Pacific, APRU's geographic remit is virtually congruent with that of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). In unison with the globe, the realities of this vast, disparate space have dramatically changed since 1997. Within this quarter-century, the world population has increased from less than 6 billion people to 8 billion. In the same period, global life expectancy has increased from 65.42 years to 73.16 years. Due to a massive rise in urbanization, 57% of the global population now lives in cities. The

massive footprint that humans have been leaving on the planet, not the least through climate change, has made researchers consider a new era of Earth's history, the Anthropocene. Between 1997 and 2023, global carbon emissions have increased from 24.4 to 37.55 billion metric tons annually. During the same period, the decline of wildlife populations has been more than 20%. The Fourth Industrial Revolution and more recently, Industry 5.0, have been changing lives at a pace unprecedented in human history. Computing power, new technologies, and artificial intelligence are transforming the ecosystems in which we live and work, from food production and manufacturing to medicine, education, the workplace, and our personal lives. The omnipresence of mobile phones has changed human interaction; it has also given political and social movements a new dimension of visibility and mobilization. Wars over territorial, cultural, and religious claims and the massive displacement of people fleeing conflicts are a global reality; regional tensions in the Asia-Pacific could readily translate into armed conflicts here, too. Financial and health crises have left a mark on the planet and the Asia-Pacific region more specifically.

Increasingly since a strategy shift in 2012, APRU adopted corporate social responsibility and sustainable development, with a growing emphasis on tackling the grand challenges of the Asia-Pacific through research-informed program hubs on Multi-Hazards, Global Health, Biodiversity, Sustainability, Population Ageing, the Digital Economy, and Food Security. Policy-related programs to increase the representation of women in academic leadership positions (Asia-Pa-

cific Women in Leadership initiative) and to give a voice to indigenous communities (Indigenous Knowledge initiative) were added, and student engagement options were multiplied. In 2023, another strategic assessment of APRU was initiated to enhance the alliance's value proposition in a massively transformed global context – leading the debate about the university of the future; enhancing student engagement and success across the network; aiming at broader and more tangible impact in tackling the big challenges of the Asia-Pacific; mobilizing underutilized resources in pursuit of APRUS's objectives.

APRU AS A META-UNIVERSITY

The Association of Pacific Rim Universities can be reconceptualized as a meta-university for the Pacific, with precise attributes supporting this status:

1. APRU offers a comprehensive range of programs informed by a large range of academic disciplines, including Health Sciences, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Cultural Studies. They dovetail with most of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

2. The combined research power of APRU's 62 members translates to 12% of the global scholarly output. Taken as a group, APRU is the 3rd largest contributor of research in the world following China and the US. While this is not research carried out by APRU itself, we convene hundreds of researchers and facilitate wide-ranging research collaboration.

3. APRU does not confer degrees, but several of its projects can be taken for credit or seek accreditation through APRU member universities, and we actively expand such offerings.

4. APRU creates student engagement through multiple formats in its thematic program hubs as well as its Virtual Student Exchange, involving thousands of students and enriching their experience – from student leadership to experiential learning and research.

»Multilateralism is APRU's strongest operational asset to deflect bilateral geopolitical discord.«

5. APRU nurtures online internationalization and global immersion through its Virtual Student Exchange and other virtual and hybrid programs and activities.

6. APRU's programs create positive societal impact, enhance resilience, and build capacity, including regarding DEI and minorities, through many of its key programs and activities. These initiatives exercise much leverage across our vast geographic network.

7. A *University of the Future* task force identifies shared challenges and develops solutions across the network, such as the utilization of generative AI tools across its member institutions.

8. APRU adopts a multilateral, systems thinking approach to its activities, integrating education, research, and policy about and within the Asia-Pacific. The challenges of this wider macro-region called APRU into existence and make a meta-university

model plausible for APRU: a higher education network with university attributes and global reach beyond the capacity of its members. Through the lens of a recent article by Simon Marginson (2024), I will reflect further on its value proposition.

THREE DILEMMAS AND THREE EMERGING CHALLENGES, AND THE VALUE OF THE META-UNIVERSITY

A 2024 contribution by Simon Marginson reassesses the role of universities vis-à-vis "three dilemmas" of Higher Education: *Is equality of opportunity impossible? Is higher education cultural or economic? Is higher education national or global?* He also singles out three "emerging challenges" that are not just emerging: *Social justice and equality at a global level*; *Political instability*; and the *Climate-Nature Emergency* (Marginson 2024).

For the first dilemma, Marginson diagnoses the failure of higher education to achieve social equalization, exacerbated by the massification of university education: the starting positions of students continue to determine their later lives. He concludes that universities must "strive for practical equality at every stage" but equally refocus research on "sectors that more directly determine social equality – such as wages and pay scales, and government tax and spend." Marginson's second dilemma emphasizes that while cultural formation through personal immersion in knowledge has traditionally been the backbone of higher education, neo-liberalism has come to prioritize employability and the economic value of education. Marginson demands to counter this tendency, advocating for continued cultural formation and student engage-

ment in it. The third dilemma highlights the recent political shift from the ideal of global education, based on free mobility of people and knowledge, to a protectionist, national education, where the "securitization of research places in jeopardy the collective science system". Marginson demands that universities counter this shift and continue to operate globally, "separately from the states that fund and regulate them".

These demands are more easily made than executed by public and private universities operating locally in a complex, rapidly transforming political and socio-economic environment. In turn, the Association of Pacific Rim Universities as a transnational network is founded precisely on the premises that are at the heart of Marginson's diagnosis. Multilateralism is APRU's strongest operational asset to deflect bilateral geopolitical discord; all annually c. 40 programs and events include participants from across APRU's 19 economies. We have upheld and strengthened the free mobility of people and knowledge on all levels. As an alliance of the leading research institutions of the Asia-Pacific, producing 1/8 of global annual research and harnessing some of the largest global repositories of knowledge, the primacy of cultural knowledge and cultural formation of our students is deeply engrained across the network. At the same time, we acknowledge that employability has become a key issue of higher education; it is a predominant concern for students and will undeniably be a determinant of the future development of universities and their efforts for relevance (Cheng, Adekola, Albia, and Cai, 2021). Within APRU, employability informs some of our initiatives,

although as a major factor of institutional adaptation, it is largely in the purview of our member universities. Social equalization within the different local contexts is beyond APRU's capacity, even though multiple of our projects provide leverage to students, early career researchers, young professionals, and minorities, including those from the less privileged parts of our network in the global South. In his concluding section, Marginson demands to "lift social justice and equality beyond the national and into the Global", where "rights of equality are also rights of diversity", and to advance this goal in higher education even ahead of states", e.g., as he suggests, by taking stock of knowledge in all languages. Diversity, both in terms of ethnicity or personal orientation, and the diversity of knowledge, is part and parcel of APRU's mission.

Marginson further points to the need to overcome political instability by educating students to become "reflexive persons capable of social action", which is arguably a key component already of the mission of today's universities and at the same time, a key aspect of APRU's Global Citizenship and Undergraduate Leadership programs. Large resources across APRU's 62 campuses, in conjunction with the local infrastructure, are already applied to address what Marginson identifies as the biggest emerging challenge, the global Climate-Nature Emergency, where he perceives the state as the only feasible point of emergency coordination. Marginson ends by hoping for a near future that would see "the transformation of higher education to contribute to state-led mitigation, disaster relief, and the reconstruction of social systems".

»APRU's value is to leverage the collective research, resources and impact of its institutions towards educational and planetary challenges.«

Quite arguably, and certainly, with regional differences, APRU's campuses collectively are already making this contribution. APRU functions as a transnational connector and catalyst for its 2 million students and 200,000 professors, as well as a wider value net for NGOs, governments, intergovernmental agencies, and industry. It serves as an overarching facilitator for the multilateral exchange and diversity of knowledge in the Asia-Pacific, through a wide range of annual programs, events, and activities. The ultimate value proposition of APRU as a meta-university is to leverage the vast collective research power, the extensive resources in education and culture, and the profound socio-economic impact of its member institutions towards educational dilemmas and planetary challenges.

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[1] See *Talloires Network of Engaged Universities.* https://talloiresnetwork.tufts.edu/

[2] See *All You Need to Know About the Indian Meta University.* https://www.collpoll.com/blog/meta-university-india/

[3] See *The African Meta University.* https://tamu-edu.org/

[4] See Meta University North-South Centre. http://www.coe.int/en/web/north-south-centre/meta-university#107418650_91744226_True