

Global Crisis Engages Universities and Community Partners: Big Tent Consortium affirms commitment and responsibilities of universities worldwide

Our networks of higher education institutions and civil society organisations have been shocked by recent tendencies towards xenophobia and even racism; and especially by the recent US government decision to prevent individuals from seven predominantly Muslim countries entering that country for 90 days. This action affects community members, workers, students, faculty and staff all over the world. Let us be clear that while the actions taken in the US are dramatic, they are the latest in a series of actions in many parts of the world that inhibit international exchange and learning on issues of knowledge, justice and democracy. Restrictions on refugees are widespread and violence against women explodes. Trends towards reducing inequality have been reversed. Differentials in income, wealth and the capacity to wield power have become grotesquely wide.

The executive order restricting travel into the US affects international community-university research partnerships, social justice conferences and networking, international studies, academic conference participation, field visits and sometimes the family relationships. The US Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, a leader in community-university partnerships says the “ability of faculty to continue teaching or conducting research is uncertain” because of the order. Statements from university associations and civil society groupings around the world condemning the order multiply. All call for the ban to end as quickly as possible; many demand a boycott of travel to the US until things change.

The US travel ban appears cruel by calculation: designed by lavishly funded internationally connected tacticians who won the White House for the xenophobic Right, and advise other far-right candidates especially in Europe to take their countries in similar directions by changing immigration and human rights policies. The assault on fundamental principles and human values that so angered the morality and decency of ‘ordinary folk’ in general has angered and mobilised the global engaged university community whose philosophy and work depend on openness and absolute respect for the work, knowledge and cooperation of others worldwide.

Our group of global community engaged universities, social movements and community organisations do not typically comment on the executive actions of a single country. Today we add our voices to those of others because of the violent assault that this new executive order represents: on the free flow of people and ideas; and Sharing of information, knowledge and dialogue for engaged scholarship

Threats to community-university engagement

In our efforts to build deeper partnerships in community engagement for research, teaching and community development purposes we make three fundamental points:

- Knowledge co-created and shared through community-university partnerships depends on a process of creation, access and action that is globally shared in an inter-connected world.
- Openness to different perspectives, experiences, ways of knowing and modes of inquiry is a basis for innovation and finding solutions to problems.
- Freedom of movement, assembly and voice are fundamental to building a global ethos of democracy, justice and inclusion.

Forging Paths of Solidarity: Questions

- How can our universities and communities work together to deepen practices of co-constructing knowledge for sustainability, justice and democracy?
- What learning and teaching practices can we as educators, workers and students develop that connect rather than separate our lives, communities and ways of thinking?
- How do we give visibility to our success stories?
- What ancient, Indigenous and diverse contemporary excluded knowledges are they drawing on, and what insights are being gleaned and put to work?

Call for Immediate Action

- Distribute this statement widely to raise awareness of the responsibilities of Universities and communities taking action on hate and exclusion now.
- Support the thousands of actions in your communities, many led by women around the world to combat Islamophobia and other exclusionary political activities.
- Create spaces to discuss how we resist and to create inclusion, mutual respect and love.
- Make use of opportunities in all of our courses, our research, our community gatherings for imagining the world we want.

Call for longer term action framework

- Identify, celebrate, support and multiply examples of good practice across regional and national higher education systems , and within individual universities themselves.
- Build capacity in community-university research and action at regional, national and institutional levels to drive change.
- Build capacities among the leadership of universities and community partners participatory pedagogies which draw on Indigenous, feminist, transformative and popular education principles and practices.
- Obtain political and financial support for the transformative work needed at regional, national and university levels.

Affirmative Action

We can combat widespread despair and foster hope and resilience through our own courageous acts of insubordination: as institutions, as students, as academics, as citizens, as workers. In so doing we remember that our own liberation is intimately tied to that of others. We can transform the old adage of ‘killing two birds with one stone’ into the life- affirming “picking two flowers with one hand”.