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11. REFOCUSING ACADEMIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This chapter examines the changing discourses regarding the fundamental mission of universities and the diverse and competing social, economic, political and technical forces of the 21st century that they now face. Of particular interest is the identification of the ways academia itself is being forced to refocus its practices to respond to the 21st century milieu. We argue that these discourses frequently call into question what now constitutes the place of universities in society. These discourses are often in tension with one another and reflect competing interests and assumptions. Which discourses are heard, whose interests are most likely to be served, and what influence will this have for refocusing academia? The term “refocusing” is not used to suggest that there has been an abandonment of focus; rather, we argue there is a need for an examination of the tensions inherent in juxtaposing the purposes of universities with forces for change. Should these tensions not be considered, it is altogether possible that a loss of focus could result. Regardless, there exists a “crisis of confidence” in society regarding what universities are and do, matched by angst within academia itself (Eagleton, 2014).

In this chapter it will be necessary at times to draw distinctions between the interests and practices of university management and academia. University management typically articulates and promulgates the vision, mission and organisational work of universities, whereas academia refers to the life or world of groups of academics who are engaged in delivering the core business of universities, namely, teaching, research and community service.

Universities, notwithstanding accusations at times of being unassailable “ivory towers”, have always been expected to be socially, economically and politically relevant and history shows that they have done so. There is considerable evidence that all modern universities to some extent are engaged with governments, industries and communities. Leading up to and entering the 21st century, however, change has been rapid, requiring universities to be highly nimble in their response to these pressures and to reflect appropriate changes in their curriculum and other academic practices. We will argue in this chapter that academia cannot afford to be passive participants in the process. As a result of modern forces for change, academia is required to become digitally literate, economically savvy and productive, politically astute, socially connected and entrepreneurial. Now, more than ever, it is essential that universities know what they fundamentally stand for in society and what and how they must engage with, and contribute to, society as they navigate their way further into the 21st century.

It is a critical time for universities. Collini (2012) describes the position of universities in the 21st century as paradoxical. “Never before in human history have

they (universities) been so numerous and so important, yet never before have they suffered from such a disabling lack of confidence and loss of identity” (p. 3).

Universities now have more students, more money, and greater interest of governments and industries than has ever occurred and are expected to be vehicles for social and economic prosperity and change. At the same time, as the 21st century progresses, scholars of higher education have even questioned whether universities will survive (Collini, 2012). Eagleton (2014) laments the “slow death of the university” at the hands of “neocapitalism” and managerialism. The fear is that as they take on new roles and new ways of practice, they will lose their essential and traditional functions and values as they relate to education and research, namely, to graduate knowledgeable, enquiring, critically discerning and responsible citizens and to conduct imaginative and original research unfettered by political and economic pressures and partisanship.

Universities today are (not alone in) experiencing unprecedented pressure to demonstrate their relevance in rapidly changing times. They are pressured to respond to advocates of new educational approaches, to adopt emergent technological affordances and to reassess their priorities and educational purposes. They are also under pressure to engage in translational, high impact research agendas and new ways of linking with industries and local communities. Despite the demonstrated responsiveness of universities in the past, there are calls for further change. An important question is whether this call for change is for new and diverse ways of achieving a commonly understood mission of universities or if instead this call constitutes a fundamental transformation of universities themselves and their role in society. Who will set the research agenda of universities and what are the implications for the established notions of academic freedom? This challenge is equally true for university educational processes in professional education programs, which are under considerable scrutiny and pressure from professional accreditation bodies. Once again the same questions are raised: Who will set the curriculum agenda and what are the implications for the established notions of academic freedom?

SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC MILIEU

After World War II, economic development associated with nation building and increasing mobility and diversity changed the long-standing elitist nature of universities considerably. An era of egalitarianism emerged in which systemic barriers to educational access and success for those marginalised in society were identified and dismantled. Egalitarianism has had a profound and lasting impact on the educational practices within higher education as well as on the constituent membership of academia. It continues to be a powerful driving force, with widening access to higher education being a key recommendation of the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) commissioned by the Australian Government. This post-World War II massification of higher education has subjected academia itself to considerable internal challenge in terms of maintaining its established liberal educational values and academic standards while also delivering an inclusive, liberative and socially just education to a greater number of students. This challenge has generated considerable tensions in the purposes and practices of everyday academia.

While egalitarianism and widening participation have made their mark on universities and academia over the past several decades, the broader global context of increasing economic constraint, accountability and high expectations for quality outcomes has become the catalyst for another fundamental change. For the past 30 years in particular, globalisation has had a significant and widespread impact on social, political and economic agendas in most countries. While the process has not completely dismissed Keynesian-type socio-economic agendas, nor led exclusively to “smaller” government, in which the design and delivery of much of its services and functions are given over to market forces, there is little doubt that neoliberal political policies have made their mark on society, regardless of which political party governs (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, pp. 45-52).

Universities have not been immune from these global forces; their operation and practices have been deeply affected and shaped by globalisation. For example, over two decades ago Fairclough (1993) highlighted that social, economic and political changes and challenges had imposed unprecedented pressures on universities to emulate their practices on the discourse of business. Marginson (1995), too, argued that academics in Australia were confronted with three distinctive imperatives, namely (1) entrepreneurial activities, for example, seeking consultancies and commercial research, (2) corporate marketisation, for example, seeking markets for fee paying courses, and (3) day-to-day teaching and research within their government financed institutions. Later Deem (2001) noted that “new managerialism”, “academic capitalism” and “university entrepreneurialism” as “values and practices from the private sector (that) have permeated higher education” (p. 8).

More recently, Collini (2012) describes contemporary discourses regarding the role and purposes of higher education as being increasingly construed as a commodity to be marketed and sold in a knowledge-driven society in service to governments, industries and communities. Further, the nature of the largely economic, neoliberal interest of governments in universities’ purposes and outcomes has eroded institutional autonomy and provoked the growth of new forms of university governance and accountability measures in the form of quality assurance and performativity measures that will assure value for investment and consumption (Collini, 2012, pp. 14-15). Collini (2012) considers the changes occurring as demonstration of an increasing trend to portray higher education primarily as a private good, and in doing so diminishing its perceived value as a public good. Eagleton (2014) is more strident in his assessment of the ways universities are changing. He says, “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 ... to turn a quick buck” (para 16).

The manifestations of globalisation have been variously met within academia, from uptake of some ideas and practices to resistance to others. Within this milieu both university management and academia are pulled in many different directions. Discontinuity and ambiguity of purpose have become everyday features for academia for the foreseeable future. Critical discernment of, and responses to, contemporary pressures are uneven within academia. What is needed for the 21st century is for academia to take a stand in arguing that universities are more than *just* businesses which operate in a market and where not all universities can or should perform the

same function (Collini, 2012, p. 188). For academia to take up this debate into the 21st century will not be easy, not in the least due to the pervasive, business-driven practices that have gained a strong foothold in universities. This is responsible for an emergent schism between university leaders *qua* business managers, and academia.

Kheovichai (2014) observes that a contemporary challenge for academia is that academics are largely not scholars of education, rather they are scholars of their disciplines and, more importantly, while they are all scholars in higher education, even fewer are scholars *of* higher education. In the past, academia has been able to be absorbed in the daily practicalities of teaching and researching their individual disciplines without having to recourse to pondering the purposes and development of their wider institution or the sector at large. These same academics now find themselves and their practice caught up in the discourse of business, namely globalisation, marketisation, performativity, quality assurance and managerialism. Hitherto, their practice within the university has been governed by traditions that were supported by tenets of academic freedom and autonomy and by notions of collegiality. Academia was grounded in an assumed, but not necessarily explicit, common purpose and the work of academics involved a balance of research, education and service to the community (Molony, 2000).

It is against this complex backdrop, complete with staggering advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), that universities have to consider and assert their place, role, form and function to maintain a level of self-determination for their future yet at the same time not blind themselves to the emergence of new affordances for the future. The introduction of web-based technologies has systematically reduced the control of academia over the educational agendas. It has blurred the roles of technologists and educators. Institutional managers determine the technologies that are available for educational processes and when and how they are to be used so as to control costs and establish institutional “branding”. Thus, for academics, control over the range of potential pedagogies is both limited and imposed.

Change and development is inevitably ever present. How can the best of academic traditions be maintained while productive and creative change be embraced? How can the ideals of academia and the new managerialism coexist? Above all academia should not look to retreat to the “ivory tower” in an attempt to refocus the purpose of universities for the 21st century. As Molony (2000) argues, “It is idle to look back at the past as a kind of lotus land to which we long to return. That land no longer exists ...” (p. 73); if it ever did. This is not to suggest, however, that the minimum defining aspects which have traditionally distinguished universities and academia from other forms of tertiary education have no place in the university of the 21st century. Collini (2012) identified that what makes a university a place of higher learning is that it (1) offers more than basic training; (2) supports scholarship that is not entirely dictated to solving immediate practical problems; (3) fosters interdisciplinary education and research, and; (4) values autonomy in intellectual activities. But is it necessarily a case of tradition and progress being mutually exclusive?

“They are no longer us” said a professor colleague commenting on Hare’s (2014) claim of Australian vice-chancellors “on salaries of over \$1m”

The answers lie not in “this in preference to that” but “both”. It is not about being “impaled on the horns of a dilemma but escaping them by rejecting the disjunctive premise” (Copi, 1982, p. 269). It is about making strong arguments for what is believed to be the *sine qua non* of the work of universities, but doing this in relation to, and in respect of, the characteristics of the contemporary milieu. For example:

- Emphasising that academic freedom should be maintained *coupled with* a strongly held social responsibility and concern for the public good
- Continuing to educate students so that they graduate with knowledge and skills that will contribute to their future employability *but also* instil values and dispositions for their critical and ethical engagement with ever reforming life and work
- Recognising that individual academics play an important role in transforming the minds of learners *but also* that teams of academics and professional staff must work together to create engaging and effective educational environments
- Recognising that society’s “wicked problems” are more likely to be solved by a multidisciplinary approach *and therefore* making a concerted effort for research and education to be informed by more than one discipline acting in isolation.

Ramsden (2003) suggested that the answer is not to “turn our backs” on contemporary trends and imperatives, but “to use it to our advantage to improve the standards of teaching” (p. 13). Holland (2005) argued that research as engaged scholarship should be a hallmark of academia in the 21st century, requiring a turning away from the exclusive disciplinary silos to refocus research such that it is interdisciplinary, engaging in “blue skies” thinking coupled with researching with, and for, communities. Such examples maintain the traditional functions of the university but are also a basis for reformation and advancement in response to 21st century needs.

Schieffer and Lessem (2014) have conceptualised a guiding framework for universities for the 21st century as an “Integral University”, in which transformative education, innovation-driven and engaged research, community activation, and interconnected and catalytic social development are considered to be the critical integrated functions of academia. They cited examples from both developed and developing nations where such universities are emerging. In all cases, these institutions have been able to transcend the compartmentalisation of academic functions of education, research and community service. Most importantly, through this integration, the goal is to realise the role of academia as a social catalyst. Realisation of integration has to be grounded in interdisciplinary engagement within academia; engagement between theory and practice and engaged research.

FROM THE MARGINS

Our explorations in this chapter have been restricted to the viewpoint of academics commenting from within academia. We have identified what we believe are forces changing practices in universities and what and who is at the margins as a result. But why should society, governments, industries, communities and even university managers listen to the concerns of academia? Won’t they be sceptical, thinking we are acting with vested interests in mind and resisting long overdue accountability and

change? Won't our apprehensions be perceived as merely wanting to recreate the glory days of the "ivory tower"? Our musings might resonate with other academics, but is that enough? What is important enough in this reformation of universities for society to listen to what we have to say? Other than galvanising academia into resistance to change by exhorting "United we stand, divided we (and society more broadly?) fall". But fall from what and to what? This is the core of the debate because collectively we have not agreed on our purposes. Abraham Lincoln said, "put your feet in the right place, then stand firm". However, agreeing on where is the "right place" to stand is the key to the challenge confronting universities and academia.

There still exists within academia notions of an ideal university in terms of the range of programs and courses offered and the capabilities it aspires to for its graduates. These tacit, idealised conceptions of what constitutes a university and academic life embody recognition and reward infrastructures and prioritisations for academic practice. They value knowledge for its own sake, discipline mastery and face-to-face engagement in education and "blue skies" exploration of disciplinary boundaries in research. These notions, observed by Symes in 1996, continue to be evident in our experience of the discourse of everyday academics, who are fully invested in education and research in their discipline (see Hawkins, Manzi, & Ojeda, 2014). Discipline academics who hold to these ideals are largely scholars working *in* higher education and are not necessarily scholars *of* higher education. By contrast, the pursuit of a new concept of higher education and universities that is coherent and aligned to the 21st century is, however, an almost exclusive discursive domain among senior institutional leaders and researchers and scholars *of* higher education (e.g. see Barnett, 2000; Coady, 2000; Collini, 2012; Eagleton, 2014; Macintyre & Marginson, 2000).

Academia fears that the fundamental function of universities – critical engagement in the pursuit of knowledge; "blue skies" research of things that may seemingly not have immediate practical outcomes; autonomy over intellectual directions – is being pushed to the margins in a context where making a significant contribution to the advancement of a knowledge economy is becoming the core purpose of academia. These trends we, and they, noted, such as valuing knowledge performativity over deep scholarship, and responding to markets at the cost knowledge growth, are unsettling and society stands to lose if our voices are dismissed. At the same time universities must be flexible and adaptable to remain central to the progress of societies, globally.

The 21st century is almost one fifth complete and universities – and their students – have never been so prolific in number and diversity. If this alone was the measure of success, then it could be concluded that universities are riding the crest of a wave. However, despite the growth, it has been noted in this chapter that some core elements and functions of the university are under attack from within and without. Apart from the more widespread existential problem associated with uncertainties about how contemporary globalisation will continue to play out, there are at least two other fundamental reasons why the tensions exist. One is in how universities have taken on a business-like form as an adaptation to several decades of politics that privileges the economy. Another has to do with traditional notions of what universities are and do and how this is broadly understood these days. The two reasons are not unconnected.

The voices of everyday academics; a significant portion of the academic and university workforce, are marginal in this debate. *If some core purposes of universities are pushed to the margins, then they are not universities any more.*

Universities, particularly (although not exclusively) those in the West, are in the fast lane of the 21st century “supercomplexity” highway. This is a “24/7”, interconnected, international/global marketplace with quality imperatives, competitive performance, accountability and transparency, efficiency and value for money for the public purse and those who pay tuition fees. Many universities have become business-like enterprises with mission and vision statements, strategic plans, human resource and marketing departments, information technology units, managerial and quality assurance frameworks, investment portfolios, a student-as-consumer ethos, a heavily casualised workforce, and succinct advertising catch cries, for example, *A place of mind*, *Worldly*, *Inspiring minds*, *Seek light*. As suggested by Collini (2012), “life in universities is now less unlike life in other large organizations” (p. 18).

CONCLUSION

In terms of traditional notions of what universities are and do, it has been argued in this chapter that there are change pressures on the fundamental characteristics that distinguish universities *qua* universities. Academia needs to be vigilant that the increasing vocationalisation of university education does not result in academic programs becoming little more than “basic” professional training. Pressure is needed to ensure funding bodies support scholarship more broadly and equitably, not just in increasingly-privileged disciplines, and not only for solving immediate practical problems. Interdisciplinarity and interconnectedness in education and research need to be strongly promoted as “better ways” to solve problems of today and tomorrow. Strident efforts should continue to be made to highlight the benefit of “responsible autonomy” in intellectual activities so that universities can continue to offer society the benefit of their specialised engagement, which is needed as the 21st century progresses.

We assert that the answers are not to be found in the mythical glories of yesteryear. This is not to say that history is irrelevant, but trying to do new things in old ways will be a recipe for failure. The “ivory tower” notion of university has been deconstructed and social equality and diversity have been well argued and largely accepted. Further, there is not a single model of what a university should be or how it should function to which all institutions should or can aspire. Cambridge is Cambridge. The fully online University of Athabasca is pursuing its particular mission, as is the Hamburger University (McDonald's Center of Training Excellence), and each of the “top 500” public and private universities listed in the Jiao Tong University Rankings, plus the thousands that are not. The diversity of universities – not in an ideal, homogenised form – is the key to contribute meaningfully and productively to particular local, national, regional, international and global needs and problems.

A key assertion of this chapter is that academia can now no longer afford to be mere scholars of their own discipline. They need to also be scholars of higher education or risk being “done unto” by the machinations of contemporary globalisation. It is the broader milieu that has shaped universities over the past few decades and will continue to do so, with or without the endorsement of academia. Universities have considerable agency and, while they benefit from having their structures resemble those of other enterprises and their functions being closely tied to what is valued by government and

In the Dickensian sense it is the best and worst of times!

other stakeholders, they are also sites of productive resistance and not just for its own sake, but on principled and moral grounds. Such qualities are necessary and need to be mobilised by academia for their own purposes and to support the purpose of the wider institution as it grapples with balancing the discourses of business and research, education and service to the community.

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