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# The University and Student Learning: A System in Conflict?

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# The University and Student Learning: A System in Conflict?

## **Abstract**

*It would help to put gates through the fences,  
which... have come to be set up on most of our  
universities between departments*

(Lovejoy, 2009:16)

Using Midgley's ideas of boundary setting it is suggested here that the university sector operates within a tightly bounded economic framework. This not only restricts the capacity of universities to work to their strengths, it also inhibits creativity and uniqueness, which disconnects them from their cultural identity. Rather, these circumstances create tepid universities all doing the same thing and producing similar results. Borrowing from global cities rhetoric, they become lukewarm, uninspired conglomerations all very similar and devoid of any real distinguishing features (Richards and Wilson, 2006; Meyer et al., 1997). The consequence of which may limit outcomes for the students.

## **Keywords**

University Systems, Conflict, Student Learning, Analytical / Vocational Education, Business Model

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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### INTRODUCTION

The lines appear to have blurred between vocational education e.g. work integrated learning (UNSW, 2011,4:6) and analytical education, which is biased towards more intellectual pursuits such as problem solving, theory development *et cetera* (Arthur, 2005:17). In earlier times, the former was predominantly the role of technical/specialist colleges whereas universities were more analytical. The sector has more recently taken a vocational approach to education in order to hold market value, while *thirdwayism* has driven the need for *labour flexibility* through *lifelong learning* (Delanty, 2003:78). In addition this, Neoliberalism *massified education by taking Fordism into the University sector* (Ibid:75). In doing so the sector has adopted a business model for its *modus operandi* (Blackmore, 2001). The multifaceted changes that are occurring emerge as quite *radical* because they impact upon the operation, process and traditions of the university and hence their very identity.

Global elites shape cities and societies through education (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Meyer et al., 1997). By promoting specific elements these elite citizens serve to change cultural identities from national to global (Gürüz, 2011). Dale referred to this as *Common World Educational Culture* (2000:428), but negated the assertions made by Meyer et al, and argued instead that Meyer's approach related to *world culture*, but *as a resource*. However, Dale advocated a *Globally Structured Agenda for Education*, which he proposed: *sees education as a topic* (2000: 428).

The debate by Dale (2000), of Meyer et al (1997), is important because it discussed whether globalisation leads to homogenous education, or a *world curriculum*. Dale concluded that world culture does not lead to homogenous education, but rather *supranational force affects national education systems* (Dale, 2000:448). These forces would more likely lead to novel and innovative approaches in education. In the debate between Dale (2000) and Meyer et al (1997), there is no mention of the effect of global education on the actual cultural identities of universities.

Using Midgley's systems approach this paper discusses the way in which tensions arise and boundary judgements are made, which may well serve to create homogenous education. Socially

<sup>i</sup>The use of the term radical being more suggestive of revolution due to the complexity of change occurring contemporaneously in the university sector.

constructed pressures, based upon prevailing rhetoric, play out to become dominating elements in the system (Midgley, 2000; Checkland, 1994). The dominant global voice is economic primacy. This has been mapped throughout the system to determine how this rhetoric may influence the culture of universities and ultimately affect the scholarship of teaching and learning, particularly during this era of austerity (Peck, 2012).

Judgements are made from different value perspectives and, as such, they will often come into conflict because there is an *intimate link* between where boundaries exist and the judgements that are made (Midgley, 2000:136). The construction of boundaries and the judgements made by the dominant economic system serve to create *tensions* [which] *exist between sacred, so valued, and profane, or devalued elements* (Ibid).

This paper discusses how economic strategies, such as running universities for profit, play out through Midgley's (2000) paradigm to become embedded within the system. It continues by questioning whether this may further impact the attributes universities seek to imbue in students such as analysis, thinking, innovation and creativity (Arthur, 2005:17). It does so by considering how boundaries, constructed through value judgements, create pressure within the system.

This exploration begins with an overview of the system in which the university sits and highlights some of the possible boundaries where tensions may arise. The creation of bias is discussed in the development and resolution of tensions throughout the system from macro inter-country, through meso intra-country and on to impact the micro-university level of stratification. The paper highlights some of the tensions, created externally, which impact upon the internal university system.

The discussion explores how, for example, a market based policy environment impacts the student and the scholarship of teaching and learning because of the tension it creates. In order to release this tension, elements are judged and one becomes more highly valued than the other. However this paper questions whether the resolution came about due to the element itself or from the capacity of the metric used (Adams, 2002; Werner, 2001). Because value judgements are made to relieve pressure at the system boundaries, decisions about one element may be determined by

something completely different (Midgley, 2000). Several questions have been raised here with regard to directions taken at all levels of the system.

In using Midgley's (2000) theory, this paper offers a possible explanation for the way in which the dominant rhetoric has endured within the university sector. The impact of which may be to the detriment of the scholarship of teaching and learning, through economic rationalist strategies such as larger numbers of students per class. Although the system has been explored at all levels, this is not exhaustive. A limited trajectory has been taken through the myriad of elements to provide a systemic exploration of the university sector. This paper offers some points for discussion on the way in which systemic pressures serve to shape the future of the university sector and questions whether the direction it is headed will enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning.

## THE CREATION OF EXTERNAL SYSTEMIC TENSIONS

The system in which the university sector sits has been mapped to identify where external elements exert pressure on internal systems. The arrows in figure 1 demonstrate macro level flows through a market based policy direction and into the micro level of university functioning.

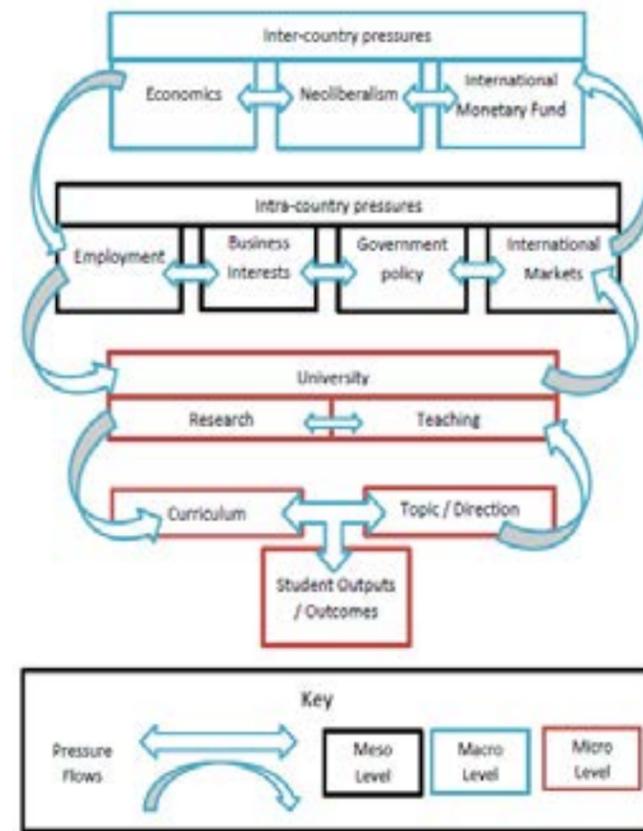
At each boundary within the system judgements are made (Midgley, 2000). Macro level pressures create tensions within the different structures of society. This example demonstrates tensions through a neoliberal policy direction. The international monetary fund affects the system through economic policy direction which, in many societies, has been premised upon neoliberal ideals (Harvey, 2007).

In today's society new managerialism, as a business model, is held in high esteem. Despite certain sectors being incompatible with the efficiencies imposed by this, the model is still pursued and the university sector is no exception. It is questionable whether the level of contingency required to keep any business buoyant in boom/bust cycles of the modern era is an element that universities can endure. This is because the model requires a fine balancing act between paying for goods and services not only in times of surplus, but also when income is limited (Williamson, 2009). This creates tension between running universities for profit or for the public good. Judgements get made in order to alleviate the tension produced by these elements. In this case, new managerialism is favoured because the business model can produce instant gratification through profit. Stability ensues through the profitability of the university. Conversely running universities for the public good becomes devalued because gratification is delayed as the societal wealth created by graduates can only be realised in the future (Peck, 2012; Harvey, 2007; Hill, 2005).

Further, the business model focuses on supply and demand, it breaks tasks into measurable elements for greater accountability and alters the classification of end users into customers. This circumstance creates some of the tensions within the university sector (Huisman and Currie, 2004). The alternative is to run universities as a *public good*; underwritten by government in order to benefit the whole of society (Hill, 2005).

At the meso inter-country level of the system tensions are created by the direction of business and/or government policy; employment opportunities *et cetera*. As a consequence, government

**Figure 1 Systemic Analysis of Intra and Inter-sector Pressures**



can be involved with higher education as a funder or in the very structuring of the system (Hill, 2005). They can have control over sections of the system through various means i.e. regulation; setting national wage levels; and / or the content of the curriculum (Ibid:125).

Economic pressures can be evidenced in the system at the inter-country level. It can be seen how course direction is closely aligned to meet market conditions. In this case, using Australia to interpret how some specific pressures arise. The Australian Productivity Report (2012) outlined how the tertiary education sector was monitored to determine how the system delivered on skills to meet the needs of industry and the economy. Furthermore, the National Institute of Labour Studies (Workforce Supply & Demand, 2013) made predictions about which courses and subsequent qualifications would be in higher demand. The report recommended the need to increase the number of students studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to service the defence and mining industries in Australia (NILS, 2013, p.7). Predictive analysis was used to determine which areas would be in demand or decline. According to one University's Strategic Plan:

*Areas of academic focus... professional, scientific and technical services [were] sectors of growth*  
(Strategic Plan, 2012-2016, Flinders University, 2013:4).

This demonstrates the importance placed on reading the market of supply and demand, which is dynamic and, often, does not behave in the predicted manner.

Global feedback loops determine direction at the meso level and subsequently impact upon the university system. For example, the curricular focus of STEM offered a solution for education to keep pace with technological innovation, globally (Savery, 2006; Berlin, 1994). It is questioned whether the globalisation of education has led to policy processes which adhere to *global capital* rather than the *needs* of specific societies, or indeed the individual student (Rizvi and Lingard, 2000:421). Evidence from university policies is mixed.

In a neoliberal / neoconservative environment, government policies are shaped by market forces and ultimately through business aspiration (Harvey, 2007). A further example of one external pressure conflicting with another can be witnessed in the statement that: "government switched to demand driven funding of undergraduate courses in 2012" (Flinders University Audit Report, 2012:5). This suggests student choice drives demand rather than policies on skill or workforce development needs.

On the other hand, other universities have attempted to balance supply and demand. For example, Berkeley University responded to business and student demand but they have done so within their existing framework of expertise. Their solution has been to adopt an interdisciplinary approach (Strategic Academic Plan, U C Berkeley, 2002). This feeds back into the genesis for the STEM topics focus (Savery, 2006). Placed within Midgley's paradigm, supply and demand would represent two conflicting elements of the macro system.

Berkley University have adopted the interdisciplinary approach to neutralise conflicts at these boundaries. Stability has been brought about through the value placed on STEM topics, which are delivered through inquiry or problem based learning approaches. These methods may be less well suited to more theoretical topics, which become devalued (Savery, 2006). This issue is discussed further in the following section on the internal system.

International markets, in this knowledge society, also shape the university system through opportunities from international student demand. This demand has been created by both, those on student visas and more particularly in relation to online courses (Gürüz, 2011:6). Again the university sector is meeting the market. Therefore competing market enterprise filters through the entire system to shape what topics are run and, to an extent, what is run in courses.

It has been discussed how external pressures, such as globalisation, neoliberal / third-way policy direction and government funding have all served to create tensions on the university sector. In doing so, these pressures may well influence the properties of supply and demand to impact the very curriculum on offer and, hence, may affect the culture of each university. The following section will discuss how systemic properties within the university system interact with the external tensions outlined to create further pressures on, for example, the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach.

## TENSIONS IMPACTING THE INTERNAL SYSTEM

Within the confines of a university, conflicts are created at the various boundaries of the system to impact upon elements that are either valued or devalued. As determined earlier, externally valued elements, such as economic policy, exert pressures which produce

internal conflicts within the university system. Midgley's (2000) theory offers a platform to examine some of the boundaries and subsequent conflicts that arise at this level of the system. In using this theory it is possible to offer some explanations of how the resolution of tension serves to direct the university sector towards the prominent voice of the market economy in today's society.

One ongoing major conflict has been situated within some of the traditional discourses, where tensions created between the rational and esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice. It has been demonstrated how global processes and government policy interact with the current economic climate, to produce a dominant voice, such as STEM focused education. This reinforces the traditional conflict where science is rational and valued and soft science e.g. history, human geography, sociology *et cetera* is non-rational and theoretical, so profane or devalued. Conflict arising from these boundary judgements remains adverse, resulting in negative ritual. Soft sciences become perceived as undesirable in the broader system. What ensues is the lack of employment opportunities for the soft sciences, with the consequent demise of these topics within the institutions (Sayer, 1992).

A further conflict related to rational and esoteric is that between objectivity and subjectivity. These tensions tend to relate, again, to the favoured disciplines i.e. science as objective and soft science, subjective. In reality, the soft sciences are more difficult to measure. Quantitative methodologies, predominantly used in the sciences are valued because they provide carefully measured phenomena with as many variables controlled as possible (Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991). On the other hand, soft sciences tend to be devalued because they are more esoteric and use, predominantly, qualitative methodologies. The conflict gets resolved through negative ritual, where interpretative methods are perceived as invalid or unreliable (Ibid). Therefore quantitative methods are objective and valued while the other, qualitative methodology tends to be subjective and devalued. However, this is a heavily debated issue (Werner, 2001).

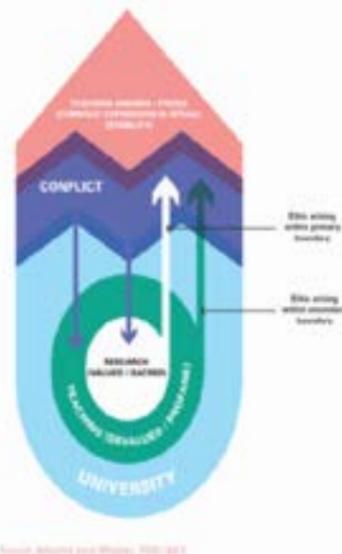
Closely related to the subjective / objective debate, boundary judgements have been made that serve to create tension (Midgley, 2000) between research which is valued and teaching, which is devalued or profane. Research becomes sacred through the income and prestige it generates. The prestige occurs internally through promotion and externally by enhancing the reputation of the university. As shown in figure 2, to neutralise conflict and bring about stability to the system a positive ritual is created in the form of awards and prizes for quality teaching and learning. This not only brings about stability but also creates *soft monitoring options* for accountability in teaching (Huisman and Currie, 2004:550).

A further example of research as sacred and teaching perceived as profane would be in the recruitment policies for academic positions. On the one hand, a publication record would be predicated on research, which is a criterion listed as essential for lecturing and teaching positions (Adams, 2002). Conversely, research positions in the University sector, until recently and thanks to Boyer (1990), did not require teaching experience. Once more teaching and learning is devalued. It is suggested here that the effective delivery of material such as research findings are equally important (Adams, 2002). This, again, highlights issues with measurability.

Research capacity is easier to measure through outputs such

as publications, whereas quality teaching can only be measured effectively through outcomes. It would be almost impossible to measure a successful teaching result in terms of outcomes<sup>ii</sup>. It could be said that stability in the system is brought about through the ritual of Student Evaluations of Teaching, where prestige is earned through various scales, despite a flawed methodology. The scales lack construct validity because they are likely to measure personality traits rather than effective teaching (Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths, 2000). This methodology has become ever more flawed due to technology, where online responses mean only the disenfranchised or most engaged students respond (Ibid).

**Figure 2: Application of Midgley's Boundary Judgement Theory**



Source: Adapted from Midgley, 2000:144/5

Other internal conflicts have arisen from external economic pressures on the university sector due to the pursuit of greater profitability. Boundary judgements get made where conflict arises between profitability of courses and quality of teaching. In order to alleviate the conflict, profits become valued and quality of teaching devalued. To bring about stability within the system, a positive ritual is created through the removal of quotas on courses (Mavromaras et al., 2013). This solution creates tension at the lowest level of the system and impacts upon student learning.

Teaching becomes further devalued because the removal of quotas leads to large class sizes, which compromises learning and increases student attrition rates. When the pupil to tutor ratio is high, tensions arise between efficient and effective practice. Research found student test scores increased when there was a reduction in the pupil to tutor ratio (Piketty, 2004, cited in Duflo, Dupas & Kremer, 2007). In addition to this, comprehensive tutoring techniques, such as student centred learning have been recognised as a successful strategy for combatting student attrition.

Vygotsky's approach to student centred learning necessitates

<sup>ii</sup>It should be noted this leads into a further discussion of the system on the validity and value of different methods of evaluation and will not be examined here.

tutors having intimate knowledge of individual student ability. To capitalise on their learning, information is targeted to match the rate at which each student can adopt new knowledge. This method has proven to deliver positive results for learning, but it does require intensive planning (Biggs & Tang, 2011:326; Shepard, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

Enabling greater numbers of students to sign up to courses has the potential to disrupt the student centred, or flipped classroom, approach to learning that is currently being adopted at many universities (Ibid). The student centred approach enables the identification and early intervention of students at risk (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). By removing quotas on courses, fewer students successfully complete their studies. Thus labour intensive methods such as student centred learning become ineffective; they become compromised by inefficiencies imposed by larger class settings (Ibid).

Teaching is devalued as efficiencies gained through large classes vanish because they inhibit effective student learning and retention strategies. The challenge of delivering quality courses to greater numbers of students has created conflict through the boundary judgements made between quantity over quality and particularly in relation to student learning outcomes. Curriculum restructuring, realised through the streamlining of courses has been instituted to bring about stability to the system. As a positive ritual, streamlining relieves the tension created between the effective delivery of material to large quantities of students and the quality of student learning.

Topics become synthesised into basic research skills for undergraduates, with specialisations offered at the post-graduate level. Consequently, even greater value is placed on post-graduate education at the expense of the undergraduate degree, which becomes devalued (Gedye, Fender & Chalkley, 2004). The technique further reinforces research as valued and teaching as devalued, because the strategy is intended to *provide students with greater flexibility to promote research based attributes* by focusing on basic research skills at undergraduate (UNSW, 2008 - 2012:6; Teaching and Learning Enhancement Plan, 2011 - 2015:4). The negative ritual in bringing about stability to the system results in less variation of topics available for study. The variety of topics offered becomes inhibited as a consequence of maintaining the quality of courses to larger numbers of students.

It has been demonstrated, using Midgley's systemic approach, how tensions created through external pressures impact internally on the university through the boundary judgments made. Diverse rituals alleviate conflicts occurring from these various judgments, which ultimately result in a negative impact on student learning. The following section discusses what these impacts mean for the university and, of more importance, for student learning outcomes.

### CONSEQUENCES OF RITUAL TO INDUCE STABILITY IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

The negative outcomes, created through systemic pressures and subsequent boundary judgments, have created an environment predicated on economics. It is acknowledged that accreditations need to be standardised for validity across international boundaries, however economics appear to govern the way in which the entire system now operates. Creativity becomes inhibited through market mechanisms in the pursuit of greater accountability and profitability.

Under this model of new managerial governance, attention is focused on performance targets and outputs in order to produce greater efficiencies (Peters, 2013; Griffin, 1999; Aucoin, 1990), where:

*measurable outcomes threatens notions of broader intellectual qualities, knowledge and understanding*  
(Blackmore, 2001:355)

According to Griffin (1999), measurability requires standardisation so processes become narrowed for easier quantification. As previously discussed, measurable outcomes in a university setting are difficult to quantify. Outputs become more highly valued, they prove to be a more efficient metric. Outputs identify how well the university is doing in terms of student grades, but they provide very little indication of how well the student's fare particularly post education (Gedye, et al., 2004; Ewell, 1991). New managerialism creates conflict between meeting student needs and fulfilling university efficiency objectives. The following section discusses how greater uniformity narrows and restricts innovation and creativity (Buckland, 2009; Shipton, Fay, West, Patterson & Birdi, 2005).

Streamlining has been proposed as a method for producing greater efficiencies in course delivery. This is achieved through *horizontal and vertical curriculum alignment* (UNSW, 2008 - 2012:6; Teaching and Learning Enhancement Plan, 2011 - 2015:4). Streamlining such a complex system means courses need to be compatible both across, as well as up and down the system. Systems need to be simple, to achieve vertical and horizontal alignment. The implementation of a basic skills degree, with specialisation at postgraduate level offers a simplified solution for vertical and horizontal alignment. Thus, courses become pared down versions of the more traditional vertically aligned programmes. Again, this demonstrates boundary shifts to alleviate conflict.

It could be argued that streamlining courses may perhaps be a strategy to remove boundaries between the sacred science and profane soft science, by taking a multi-disciplinary approach. It is suggested that rather than removal, the boundaries have been redrawn (Midgley, 2000). These changes may also serve to devalue some universities while enhancing the value of others.

As a positive ritual, streamlining resolves conflicting pressures and, as a component of the business model, becomes highly valued. The strategy may provide a competitive edge for some universities because they have re-aligned with the market to enhance their viability. This could be interpreted as narrowing the curriculum to meet market demands, rather than providing the diverse curriculum traditionally delivered by universities.

In a similar vein, the external demands of the market may not align with student interest, as discussed earlier. The question is: are students making choices for university study based upon their employability at graduation or out of interest for the topic. Apparently, students are choosing courses that "*will improve their chances of finding employment after graduation and of having higher earnings*" (Mavromaras et al., 2013:v).

They choose courses based upon their assessment of supply and demand in the market place (Ibid). It has been suggested that it is better to have a market driven university sector than to have a mismatch between qualifications and employment, where the employee's qualifications may be higher than those required by the employment market (Ibid). Therefore vocational courses, such as nursing and social work, so the more pragmatic courses appear to

be more highly valued than theoretical courses such as sociology and philosophy, which are more analytic in nature. These circumstances would surely change the culture of the university sector away from the theoretical and analytical foundations. This adds to the earlier debate between Dale (2000) and Meyer et al (1997).

Furthermore, suggesting that university study is purely driven by market forces of supply and demand creates an element of exclusivity to the sector and defies the education for all policies of the current era (Delanty, 2003). This is because the rhetoric excludes the fact that not all students study to gain employment, some do so for the pleasure acquired purely from knowledge acquisition (Alba & Williams, 2012).

The tension, created under the economic model, as Peters suggested, "*friction has been created in the physical systems, so transaction cost analysis is undertaken,*" has led to judgements being made between larger quantities of students signing up to classes and the quality of education delivered (2013:16). This has resulted in the massification of higher education; achieved through the latest technological innovations (Blackmore, 2001). Consequently, the sector has seen the introduction of 'Massive Open Online Courses' (MOOCs). This has meant large student numbers no longer pose a problem, in fact:

*The cost of delivery to an additional student is extremely small*  
(Harris, Batley, Mcloughlin & Wales, 2013:5).

MOOCs present an interesting problem for student learning outcomes in a global market, such that a *paradigm shift* will need to occur in the approach to teaching for many universities (Biggs and Tang, 2011:8). This is because the focus has been on teaching centred, rather than the student centred, problem based learning approach (Ibid). It will be interesting to see how student success is measured under MOOCs, particularly since the facilitator's role and expertise can make a positive contribution to student learning outcomes (Paechter, Maier & Macher, 2010; Savery, 2006). Furthermore, online learning has been found to have higher rates of student attrition, often due to isolation and not feeling part of the university community (Carr, 2000). This brings the discussion back to quantifying student learning, particularly when the focus has become one of accountability and standardisation. The amount of information learnt, as an output, becomes valued over the quality of learning, which is an outcome (Biggs, 1979).

A further issue related to MOOCs is with governance because management, providers and students would be spatially distant (Harris, Batley, Mcloughlin & Wales, 2013). This also raises the question of authenticity. Under whose jurisdiction would the qualification be relevant, so authentic? As witnessed in the corporate sector through the adoption of neoliberal policies, multi-national corporations have far greater power than national governments (Harvey, 2007). Furthermore, no single organisation exists to presume overarching governance and reign in the power of the multi-national. This provides them with the capacity to control and hence exploit the employment environment through threats and coercion of the workforce (Harvey, 2007). In all likelihood this could occur with multi-nationals governing the university sector and may well call into question the very validity of qualifications.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a snapshot approach to the university system. It has highlighted some of the changes brought about through the dominant rhetoric of economic policy. Midgley's system theory was

used to explore how the changes occurred and attempted to unpack some of the conflicts that have arisen as a consequence. The university as a complex system involves the careful act of balancing internal and external pressures. Judgements are made at the boundaries of conflicting elements. These judgements are value laden and result in a dominant discourse, which has become economic.

As the university sector adapts to a business model, the pressures realised from the massification of education cease to be problematic. Departments no longer need to compete for students as courses are delivered online. As a consequence, courses become leaner and pared back to reduce costs and their delivery becomes impersonal. An over reliance on corporate strategies means the university becomes focused on accountability and streamlining; they lose sight of their main objective, student learning. Planning and marketing techniques take precedence in the promotion of courses, rather than outcomes such as student learning or the quality of education delivered (Buckland, 2009). It is suggested that a university's uniqueness may become the marketing campaign itself as the university becomes a distilled version of its former self. As such, the university sector is in danger of becoming similar to global cities, which have been considered devoid of any real distinguishing features so they represent:

*the serial reproduction of culture in different destinations*  
(Richards and Wilson, 2006:1209).

Originally each university developed from a different creative framework. This made each one culturally diverse and unique; they stood out from one another. In doing so, they would have provided greater diversity to a broader range of students.

There is a very real threat that, as with multi-national companies, universities may become multi-national, where governance becomes difficult and therefore limited (Harvey, 2007). Consequently, as larger universities absorb the smaller, they end up as institutions in the true sense of the word - environments devoid of culture and churning out mediocrity. Universities of the future need to meet the requirements of the twenty-first century student, rather than the global economy. This means student learning takes precedence over profit, because societal rewards are future oriented. As Boyer suggested the scholarship of teaching and learning is in the pursuit of:

*The development of scholarly habits and dispositions in students that may serve to reshape society*

(Cited in Vardi, 2011:4).

It is questioned whether this will be achieved, or whether the university sector will continue in such a high state of flux, driven by the market economy. It is cautioned that, in order to keep pace with the needs of the global market, the university sector may well lose sight of their purpose.

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