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The University and Student Learning: A System in Conflict?

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Abstract

It would help to put gates through the fences,

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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

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Cover Page Footnote

1 The use of the term radical being more suggestive of revolution due to the complexity of change occurring contemporaneously in the university sector 2 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 3 I would like to acknowledge the support of Don Houston from the Centre for University Teaching at Flinders University as this developed, as the outcome, of a discussion 4 I would like to acknowledge the support of Distinguished Professor Iain Hay because this information came about as the result of a discussion on the future of Human Geography at Flinders University. * I would like to acknowledge Sarah Adkins, Art Student, Monash University as Illustrator
The University and Student Learning: A System in Conflict?

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

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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.

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 thirdwaysim 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 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 paper acknowledges 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 processes. 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 pressure creates 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 turn, has been premised upon neoliberal ideals (Hill, 2007).

In today’s society new managerialism, as a business model, is held up as best practice for many sectors but is not always compatible with the efficiencies imposed by this mode, 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 and 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 (Williams, 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 management business models can provide a return on investment which becomes devalued (Huisman and Currie, 2004:550). It is suggested here that teaching and learning is threatened by this structure of the system within various means (i.e. regulation; setting national wage levels; and/or the content of the curriculum). 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 specific pressures arise. The Australian National Centre for the Statistics of Business (2012) have conducted research on 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 (2011) have identified Australia’s productivity gap (2011) outlined how the tertiary education sector can be involved with research as a funder or in the very structure of the system (Midgley, 2000). They have conducted research on the systemic pressures that are involved with research and teaching processes (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 state of the university sector and questions whether the direction it is headed will enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Global feedback loops determine direction at the meso level and subsequently impact upon the university system. For example, the curriculum of STEM offered a solution for education as a way to keep pace with technological innovation, globally (Savery, 2006; Berlin, 1994). It is questioned whether the globalization of education has led to policy processes which adhere to global capital rather than the specific needs of society. This issue has been addressed within some of the traditional discourses, where tensions created between the rational and esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice.

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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. This has been demonstrated within some of the traditional discourses, where tensions created between the rational and esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice. It has been demonstrated within some of the traditional discourses, where tensions created between the rational and esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice. It has been demonstrated within some of the traditional discourses, where tensions created between the rational and esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice. It has been demonstrated within some of the traditional discourses, where tensions created between the rational and esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice.

Therefore competing market enterprise filters through the entire university system through opportunities from international business. In doing so, these pressures may well influence the culture of each university. The impact of which may be to the detriment of the scholarship of teaching and learning. 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.
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. It could be said that this 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 (Shehlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths, 2000). This methodology has become ever more flawed due to technology, where online responses mean more of the disenfranchised or most engaged students respond (ibid).

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

Source: Adapted from Midgley, 2000:1445

Other internal conflicts have arisen from external economic pressures on the university sector due to the pursuit of greater profitability. Boundary judgments get made where conflict arises from the pursuit of greater profitability, and whether profit must be made from internal versus external funding and the division of resources necessary for the researcher versus the student. Teaching becomes further devalued because the removal of boundary judgements, have created an environment where the removal of the boundaries has been drawn and orchestrated so that the reconfiguration of the university and, of more importance, for student learning outcomes. Curriculum restructuring, realised through the streaming of courses has been instituted to bring about stability to the system. As a positive ritual, streaming relieves the tension created between the effective delivery of material to large quantities of students and the quality of student learning. Trends become synthesised into basic research skills for undergraduates, while postgraduate education becomes more research orientated (Midgley, 2000). These changes may also serve to devalue the strategies made between quantity over quality, and particularly in the university and, of more importance, for student learning outcomes. Curriculum restructuring, realised through the streaming of courses has been instituted to bring about stability to the system. As a positive ritual, streaming relieves the tension created between the effective delivery of material to large quantities of students and the quality of student learning. Trends become synthesised into basic research skills for undergraduates, while postgraduate education becomes more research orientated (Midgley, 2000).

Teaching is devolved as efficiencies gained through large classes vanish because they inability 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 the more traditional vertically oriented level. Even greater value is placed on post-graduate education at the expense of the undergraduate degree, which becomes revalued (Griffiths, 2004). More online 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 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, that tensions 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 devolved because the removal of quotas adds to larger class sizes, which compromises learning and increases student attention 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, 2013). 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 the vertical and horizontal 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 more uniform, with the more traditional vertically oriented level. 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 the section of students who want to make money in the job market, but also pursue a high level education. 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 seen (Puchies, Maier & Macher, 2010; Sawyer, 2006). Further research into MOOCs present an interesting problem for student learning outcomes in a global market, but whether student 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 (Biggs & Tang, 2011:8). Student centred learning, has found to have higher rates of student attrition, often due to isolation and not feeling part of the university community (Caro, 2000). This brings the discussion back to equating student learning outcomes to market demands. Teaching and Learning Enhancement Plan, 2011 - 2015:4). 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.

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 system involves the creation of a culture of balancing internal and external pressures. Judgements are made at the boundaries of the world economy. It is cautioned that, in order to keep pace with the needs of the global market, the university sector may well lose officers in the serial reproduction of culture. In different destinations (Richards and Wilson, 2006:129).

Original entries each developed from a different creative framework. This made each one culturally diverse and unique; they stood out from another one. 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 world - 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 paper considers the student learning that 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.


It is questionable 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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