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The University and Student Learning: A System in Conflict?

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Abstract

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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.

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 (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.

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

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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 article attempts 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 (Figure 1). 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 this instance, has been premised upon neoliberal ideals (Harvey, 2007).

In today’s society, managerialism is, for some, a tool for economic survival. It is believed that this principle is compatible 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 being created 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 and the social learning graduates can only be realised in the future (Peck, 2012; Harvey, 2007; Hilt, 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 like businesses, controlled by government in order to benefit the whole of society (Hilt, 2005).

At the meso-inter country-level of the system tensions are created by the direction of business and/or government policy; employment opportunities at et cetera. As a consequence, government can be involved with higher education as a funder or in the very structuring of the system (Midgley, 2000). 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:123)).

TENSIONS IMPACTING THE INTERNAL SYSTEM

Global feedback loops determine direction at the meso level and subsequently impact upon the university system. For example, the curriculum focus of STEM offered a solution for economic growth to keep pace with technological innovation, globally (Savery, 2006). This issue is questioned whether the globalisation of education has led to policy processes which adhere to global capital rather than the public good (Huisman and Currie, 2004). It is questioned whether the globalisation of education has led to policy processes which adhere to global capital rather than the public good (Huisman and Currie, 2004). It is questioned whether the globalisation of education has led to policy processes which adhere to global capital rather than the public good (Huisman and Currie, 2004). It is questioned whether the globalisation of education has led to policy processes which adhere to global capital rather than the public good (Huisman and Currie, 2004). It is questioned whether the globalisation of education has led to policy processes which adhere to global capital rather than the public good (Huisman and Currie, 2004).

In a neoliberal / neoclassical environment, government policies are shaped by market forces and ultimately through business aspiration (Harvey, 2007). Further a more example of one external pressure conflict 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.

This creates tension between running universities for profit, but also when income is limited (Williamson, 2009). Again the university sector is meeting the market. This demand has been created by both, those on the inside as well as those on the outside. Placed within Midgley’s paradigm, these methods may be less well suited to more theoretical topics, which hold inherent value. This 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 students. 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 globalization, 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 or the very ethos of teaching (Sayer, 1992). Within the culture of change, this theory it is possible to offer some explanations of how the effective delivery of material such as research findings are not to be the detriment of the scholarship of teaching and learning, as 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).

This tension is 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 viewed as less tangible due to the value placed on STEM topics as place, predominantly with non-qualitative methodologies. The conflict gets resolved through negative ritual, where interpretative methods are perceived as valuable and less well-suited to more theoretical topics, which hold inherent value. This is discussed further in the following section on 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 tensions, which are created due to the aforementioned pressures. 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 the esoteric help to perpetuate the dominant voice. It has been demonstrated that the 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 the soft sciences are seen as personal and subjective. The conflict is in 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).

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Figure 1: Systemic Analysis of Intra and Inter-sector Pressures
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 stability in the system is brought about through the ritual of Student Evaluations of Teaching, where prestige is earned through various scales, whereas quality teaching can only be measured "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 skewed towards technology, where online responses mean that the disenchanted 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 profitability meets 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, streamlining relieves the tension created by the effective delivery of material to large quantities of students and the quality of student learning. Terms become synthesised into basic research skills for undergraduate students, through which the more traduced vertically. Consequently, even greater value is placed on postgraduate education at the expense of the undergraduate degree, which becomes undervalued (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 skills at undergraduate (UNSW 2008 - 2012:12). 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 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 classes, which, in turn, 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 Duplo & Kremer, 2007). In addition to this, comprehensive tutoring techniques, such as student centred learning have been recognised as a successful strategy for combating student attrition.

Vygotsky's approach to student centred learning necessitates... 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.

Under this model of new managerial governance, attention is focused on performance targets and outcomes in order to produce greater efficiencies (which each year, 1999, as measured by) has led to a movement of excluding different methods of evaluation from the theoretical and analytical foundations. This adds to the earlier debate between Dale (2000) and Meyer et al (1997).

Further, the strategy made by student learning, particularly to gain employment, some 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 becomes the damage and the possible, cost analysis is undertaken, has led to judgement being made between profitability of courses and quality of teaching. In order to

MOOCs present an interesting problem for student learning outcomes in a global market, such that economic 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 that can provide a competitive edge for some universities. The strategy may provide a competitive edge for some universities because they have re-aligned with the market to enhance their employability and prestige. This can make a positive contribution to student learning outcomes (Panchotra, Maser, & Macher, 2010; Sawyer, 2006). Further, the focus on MOOCs present an interesting problem for student learning, particularly when the focus has become one of accountability under MOOCs, particularly since the facilitator’s role and expertise can make a positive contribution to student learning outcomes (Sawyer, Panchotra, Macher, & Macher, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). MOOCs can make a positive contribution to student learning outcomes (Sawyer, Panchotra, Macher, & Macher, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

A further issue related to MOOCs is with governance because management, providers and students would be spatially distant (Harris, Bailey, McInlgow & Wales, 2013:5). This 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, multinational corporations have far greater power than national governments (Harvey, 2007). Further, no one organisation exists for the pursuit of profit and 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 this, the multi-national government of this sector and the university sector 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 sector involves the core 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 in bulk. As a consequence, courses become leaner and prices are driven 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 realised from the massification of education cease to be problematic. 

At this point, we refer to the twenty-first century student, rather than the global economy. This student is not defined in the traditional sense of the word - environments devoid of culture and churning out students who are fit rather than good (Harvey, 2007). Consequently, as larger universities may become multi-national, where governance becomes greater diversity to a broader range of students.


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Buckland, R. (2009). Private and public sector models for strategies in universities. There is a 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 student is not defined in the traditional sense of the word - environments devoid of culture and churning out students who are fit rather than good (Harvey, 2007). Consequently, as larger universities may become multi-national, where governance becomes greater diversity to a broader range of students.


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