

Three Fundamental Challenges for the Modern University Arising from Stated Purpose and Globalization

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Abstract

As large multinational businesses, universities of the 21st century communicate their purpose through mission statements and promotional materials. A brief investigation of such data identified that the modern university mirrors many of the tenets that underpinned the university during its history. Whilst there always have been obstacles to universities to achieving their purpose, incorporating the responsibilities of knowledge diffusion and knowledge accumulation, three additional, fundamental challenges exist today largely in direct response to globalization pressures. They are: (a) new funding realities, proprietary knowledge and knowledge diffusion are contradictory concepts; (b) new media realities shape knowledge and public opinion; and (c) new sectoral challenges subjugate knowledge collection and diffusion to economic rationalist notions. Universities must be mindful of these challenges and adjust their strategic thrust through appropriate strategic architecture building including engaging in lobbying.

Key words: universities, mission statements, purpose, research, teaching, scholarship, economic rationalism, proprietary knowledge, knowledge dissemination

Introduction

If an organization has no point of view about the future, how should it get there? And if it does not understand its *raison d'être*, how can it fulfil its purpose? These sentiments summarize why the majority of strategic planners incorporate notions of visions, missions and purpose, and in our opinion, quite rightly so. These are so fundamental that we have not encountered a strategy book that does not incorporate one or all concepts. In this, writers in strategy are of one mind with University decision-makers, as evidenced in the publication of mission statements in university promotional materials drawn from a global sample of universities.

Concepts of Vision, Mission and Purpose

The concept of vision invokes various interpretations. Some consider it the purpose, others the motivating force or even the value of the firm. We would like to regard it as a combination of Hamel and Prahalad's (1995) 'strategic intent', 'core values' as reflected by Collins and Porras (1996), and 'core purpose', defined by Argenti (1976). 'The purpose of any organization is the provision of benefit to the beneficiaries' (Argenti 1976, p38), and the marketing guru Levitt (1960) argued for marketing orientations as more enduring than product orientations. In the literature, missions tend to be shorter-term than visions but incorporate the basic tenets of the vision (see David 1995).

Purpose of Higher Education – a Brief Historical Perspective

The purpose of higher education has a documented history that begins with Plato. In his doctrine of Ideas, Plato talks about full equality of educational opportunity, the need to instruct without compulsion, and about the essence of higher education being the search for ideas (Durant, 1943). Plato's (1969) knowledge accumulation process follows that of his teacher Socrates where the way forward lies in criticism of conventional knowledge through the process of dialogue encompassing the learner where the learner also must critically examine the knowledge acquired – today referred to as reflective learning. Freedom of direction and depth of enquiry is

essential – ‘the philosopher with his passion for wisdom, will be one who pursues all wisdom, not only some part of it’ (Plato, 1971, p182).

Medieval times saw the birth of the modern institutional university. Its organizers shared with Plato the ideal of universal entry opportunity and of collaborative governance (Barnett, 1990). Its autonomy was safeguarded by imperial or papal bull – deemed necessary in the light of conflict between host society and university. Economic rationalismⁱ was alive to the extent that students were instructed with a view to earning their livelihood (Hart 2002), but there was no requirement to complete the degree as the educational process was considered of value in its own right.

Newman’s (1996) contribution came in the mid-19th century as part of a requirement to define the need for a Catholic university. He mandates the scientific presence of theology, but agrees with Kant (1952) that universities should teach all that is teachable and not just what has immediate utility, education should be liberal - knowledge should be imparted to ‘its own end’ (Newman, 1996, p76). Universities need to provide ‘liberal in contrast with useful’ learning (Newman, 1996, p93) the latter in modern times associated with vocational instruction. ‘The purpose of a university education is the achievement for a particular expansion of outlook, turn of mind, habit of thought and capacity for social and civil interaction’ (Newman, 1996, p.xv). Its objective is ‘educational excellence’ which rests on an integration of experience and reason and requires an act of reflection upon that experience and reason. For Newman, the learner had to retain a proper conception of how the whole relates to its parts. Universities should not yield up to rational economic principles ‘In proportion as his sphere of action is narrowed, his (scholar’s) mental powers and habits become contracted; and he resembles a subordinate part of a powerful machinery, useful in its place, but insignificant and worthless out of it (p119). Barnett (1990) summarizes the effect of Newman’s education as ‘intellectual self-empowerment’ (p21). Newman did not view research an essential function of a university.

Jaspers (1965) had seen the German university underwrite knowledge fragmentation and support nationalism. He was aware of the tension between state and academe,

leading him to conclude in favour of academic freedom. In that he agrees with Kant (1952) who argued the essence of university is autonomy where the quest for truth can be realized having safely dispensed with spiritual or secular controls. Jaspers' hope is that if universities could be founded on a unitary and purposeful conception of knowledge, it could play a role in the reconstruction of a more humane society. Jaspers' essence of the university revolves around 'a community of scholars and students seeking knowledge and truth' (Barnett, 1990, p21). Jaspers (1965) insisted that knowledge not be restricted arbitrarily, he was conscious of the difficulties of securing reliable knowledge: its universal validity arises from 'consensus' (p 25). Although Jaspers' purpose demanded that universities teach, research, transmit a certain culture and engage in professional education, the search for the truth is through research inquiry cementing the relationship between teaching and research (Barnett, 1990). He mirrors Newman's freedom of learning and interdisciplinary knowledge accumulation, and he emulates the idea of Socratic dialogue. The outcome for the individual goes beyond knowledge acquisition but is a 'formative process aiming at meaningful freedom' generating the 'transformation of the whole man' (Jaspers, 1965, pp64-5).

In distilling the above there are a number of recurring ideas irrespective of national boundaries, time frames and political realities: these involve autonomy of the cooperating community of scholars for reasons of unrestricted and indivisible knowledge acquisition whilst maintaining truth in inquiry, the latter being difficult to achieve, although obstacles to finding it are diminished by critical discourse.

The Purpose of Higher Education as Expressed through the Mission Statement in the Modern University

We have examined 16 university web sites in seven countries based on convenience sampling of data collectionⁱⁱ. It appears that the basic tenet regarding the purpose and activity of universities has not much changed, other than expanded boundaries – the result of globalization in education.

In line with Jaspers' activities of universities, most see their role in teaching and scholarship, research and community outreach, for examples see Macquarie

University, Cambridge and Oxford University, the University of Lyon, and the University of Hong Kong. The idea of excellence, central to Newman's principles, is mirrored by Cambridge whose mission it is to pursue 'education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence' or by Ulster which strives to 'be a model of an outstanding regional university', by McGill University who promises to 'carry out scholarly activities judged to be excellent when measured against the highest international standard', whilst Hong Kong University 'seeks to sustain and enhance its excellence'. That there should be a nexus between research and teaching activities is stated overtly by some, for example by Macquarie University; Victoria University promises that teaching and learning will be invigorated by 'being informed by a culture of internationally recognized research'; and WSU Vancouver supports the stand that their basic mission is 'creating new knowledge or information that we impart to our students'.

A revival of economic rationalism is indicated by many through their contribution to economic prosperity: see for example the University of Ulster's mission. WSU Vancouver uses the community to 'assist their research mission by helping to frame questions, providing data bases and giving us opportunity for application'. The University of Hong Kong promises to 'act in partnership with the community over the generation, dissemination and application of knowledge'.

The importance of up-to-date knowledge is in the forefront of the University of Western Sydney's mind where 'the University's place will be at the leading edge of knowledge providing contemporary education'. For WSU Vancouver, its first purpose is to provide students 'with discipline based information and access to it', and by doing so, the university fulfils its obligation 'to create an informed citizenry'. As an aside, a discipline-based approach ignores the holistic approach to information diffusion hailed important by writers in education. Most universities consider research pivotal to their community¹. This is hardly surprising as research is the public window to higher education providing professional identity and inviting peer acknowledgement. In marketing terms, the research function contributes most to the brand.

¹ Based also on discussions among 20 Australian and New Zealand business studies deans for a AUTC research project.

Some aspects of *Lehrfreiheit*ⁱⁱⁱ as a sub-set of institutional autonomy and the importance of the Socratic dialogue are considered part of the culture of Texas State University, they value ‘engaging teaching and learning based in dialogue, student involvement and the free exchange of ideas’. Victoria University incorporates both staff and students in the protection of academic freedom. The Newman systems approach reflects in interdisciplinary objectives. Cambridge University values the ‘interdisciplinary nature of the Colleges as a major stimulus to teaching and learning’, Oxford University builds on the independent college structure that fosters ‘a stimulating, multidisciplinary academic community’ and the University of Lyon’s objectives include ‘enhancing inter-establishment dialogue, interdisciplinary research and teaching in a context of continuing development and innovation’.

We believe that we have confirmed with our small multinational sample of university missions that the purpose and process of higher education has retained its relationship between knowledge accumulation and its diffusion. There appears a broad agreement among our sample of university missions/purposes what functions are to be fulfilled by universities and that scholarly activity, research and knowledge diffusion go hand in hand. Implicit in scholarly behaviour is following a process of inquiry that seeks truth and objectivity. Jaspers and others had already recognized the difficulty in achieving such aims, and so we do not wish to dwell on these aspects but on three new challenges.

Challenges to Achieving Purpose

For the higher education institution of the 21st century, we would like to add three additional challenges that stand in the way in universities achieving part of their purpose which arise largely from globalization. They are: (a) new funding realities, proprietary knowledge and knowledge diffusion are contradictory concepts; (b) new media realities shape knowledge and public opinion; and (c) new sectoral barriers subjugate knowledge collection and diffusion to economic rationalist notions.

Knowledge Diffusion and Proprietary Knowledge are Incongruent Concepts – Challenge 1

Research and development (R&D) costs have increased, often beyond the financial capabilities of the largest multinational corporations (MNEs) (Ohmae, 1989). Firms have responded by engaging in research alliances and by seeking global markets to spread the cost of R&D across a larger customer population. Research synergies are cited as significant motives for acquisition activities (Ghemawat and Ghadar, 2000). Although universities are frequently operating as MNEs, none are global giants listed in the Fortune 500, and so it is not surprising they have lost their pre-eminence as the main hub for innovation and R&D. Gaita (2000), in the footsteps of Newman, reaffirmed the role of university members needing to be reflective about their discipline rather than advance it. The question is as to what extent we can do just that.

For business, proprietary knowledge represents a major source of competitive advantage. It is often proprietary knowledge that allows MNEs to outperform host country competitors. This idea forms the basis of the Kindleberger Hymer theory of foreign direct investment (FDI), see Hymer (1976). The advantage from proprietary knowledge is retained provided local firms cannot easily copy it. This is one reason why MNEs are keen to protect their knowledge from competitors and why FDI as an entry strategy is generally preferred to licensing. Buckley and Casson (1975) established for proprietary knowledge to be of any use at all, it must exist in a world system of imperfect markets. Only then can advantages be exploited by MNEs without becoming a public good. Companies owning secrets can operate a system of 'internal markets'. These foundation theories of FDI lead to the conclusion that it is in the interest of organizational knowledge accumulators not to diffuse information. 2001 OECD data shows that OECD-wide 70 percent of R&D was conducted by business and 17 percent by higher education. In the US the comparative figures were 74/14, the EU 64/21, Canada 57/30, the UK 67/21 and in Australia 47/27. There may not be a perfect correlation between expenditure and productivity of each sector in every OECD country but we believe data reflects the relative order of knowledge accumulation. We may state the obvious, but university members cannot diffuse what they cannot know.

What happens to that aspect of the research conducted at universities? Some information gets diffused through teaching activity and publication in journals, though

copyright usually is appropriated by journals as part of the publication conditions, and typically authors have to obtain the studied company's permission to publish, even if the study was not sponsored by the business in question. There are other important issues that impinge on knowledge accumulation and its subsequent diffusion. First, sectoral funding has not kept pace with needs in a global research environment - the dominant role that universities played is fast diminishing. Second, funds are frequently targeted to sponsor priorities which may not coincide with institutional research strengths. Third, funding provisions are frequently coupled to industry partnerships. The first two impact on the university competitiveness to accumulate knowledge. The third involves preferred commercialization through industry partners with safeguards for proprietary knowledge in place. Even if the university commercializes in-house, this arm is generally separate from teaching activities, and by matching external funding with cash or in-kind support, universities must seek commercial returns to avoid disadvantaging other activities. In all cases, information, if it has commercial value, is not available for broad diffusion.

Media Realities Shape Knowledge and Opinion – Challenge 2

Freedom of the press rings hollow in the early 21st century, unless we own access to the media channels. This holds true for a handful of MNEs and their owners. Although editors seem to have always controlled media in their locality, alternative points of view were relatively easier to obtain by readers, listeners and viewers. But since the 1950s, the trend towards global oligopolistic media structure has been steadily increasing and is likely to continue. As Ted Turner proffered 'we are going to end up with four or five mega companies that control everything we see on radio and television' (The Guardian Weekly, 1995). Current ownership concentrations have been documented by McMurtry (1998).

The free press is free to shape our world in the way opportune to its owners whose agenda of power and wealth is shared and who have an interest in maintaining the status quo or even enhancing the system under which they secured their prosperity. We are reassured owners do not interfere with editorial policy, but Conrad Black declared 'If editors disagree with us, they should disagree with us when they're no longer in our employ... Therefore, I will ultimately determine what the papers say,

and how they're going to be run' (Winter, 1994, p.D7). We are reassured advertisers represent no conflict of interests. Yet the fulfilment of profit maximization conceals the hazardous nature of processes and products (see Kramer 1984), other products are recommended provided sponsorship is adequate – demonstrated through well-known radio personalities in Australia, whilst editors reflected 'interference from advertisers to the tune of ninety percent' (see Carothers, 1992).

The strength of indoctrination into certain value systems is considerable. The media seem to have convinced a large proportion of global population of the essential twin values of capitalism and democracy – incidentally incongruent concepts. Indoctrination seems to infiltrate top global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as documented by the Nobel laureate Stiglitz (2002. Media emphasize that free markets are the best allocators of scarce resources, an idea originated by Smith (1776) and reinforced by Hayek (1944). A number of the assumptions made by theory originators no longer hold true (see Buttery and Richter, 2002, pp143-4) and therefore challenge concept validity. Largely unchallenged also is that freedom and free markets are on the same side of an equation. Only a few argue that the advent of free markets condemns millions to helpless dependency where they are mostly unfree to make a consumer choice, often unfree to partake as one of the factors of production, and as we have shown largely unfree to know.

Sectoral Realities that Contribute to Barriers – Challenge 3

Under the economic rationalist paradigm, the objective of business education is to produce knowledge applicable to business competitiveness. Success is measured by ever-growing number of alumni able to serve business and by the inexorable need of faculty to link to business which in turn exercises influence over education providers' research agenda and curriculum designs. Only research linked to innovation is an activity worth pursuing - the notion of discovery as an end in itself is unworthy as it cannot demonstrate research funding support. According to Barnett (1990), the instrumental character of research is supported by two aspects: first significant elements of research are organized by government on a customer-contract basis, and second project initiatives often emanate from funding agencies setting agendas, administering committees and ensuring that projects run towards desired ends. Just

because research is good does not mean it will attract funding. Truth, objectivity, rationality and transparency in inquiry lose their primacy in scholarly activity.

It is not new to question rationality, objectivity or truth in education as these are difficult to achieve. But this does not mean we should not strive for them. The carrot and stick approach is administered to academics. If we declare our partiality towards corporations and their profit maximization dictum this truth deems us value-adders. If we question what is truth in the knowledge that no single interpretation exists moreover that the consensus of what truth represents can change over time, and understand that there is no such concept as objective knowledge, we are marginalized. To get to the truth, we are told by Habermas (1978), is a process that incorporates interactions with others who, as a community of truth seekers, are trying to get to the truth by informed discourse. Certain ethical prerequisites include truthfulness, sincerity, intelligibility and coherence. The discussion, although structured, offers opportunities to express new perspective. For the higher education sector, there is something wrong with the assumption that what is offered on a platter as 'objective truth', not because we argue here with the notion of economic rationalism, but because it prevents any future search for truth.

As truth and knowledge are not value-neutral, we must consider whose interests we want to serve. It would appear that increasingly our curriculum reflects the ideology of international business. But if we cannot shake off the presence of ideology in knowledge accumulation and diffusion, how can we mitigate the worst effects? In true Socratic tradition, we could engage in critical discourse which presupposes small-group interaction rather than lecturing to large classes, another involves egalitarian relationships that ensure that the mighty cannot misuse their power during negotiation and that all stakeholders have an equal opportunity to be heard (Habermas 1979). Such responses remind us of collegiality in a community of scholars, but they are an anathema to today's hierarchical structures capable of communication distortion.

Plato introduced the idea of 'Lernfreiheit'^{iv} which is facilitated in a system where voluntary adult learners invoke no penalties when, for example, slow- or even non-completions of courses occur. Sponsors have introduced rules that govern financial

support environment and completion times. The exception is the learner who can satisfy the desire for knowledge and has the money to pay for it.

Throughout history, institutional autonomy was deemed important. By 2004, universities had lost much of their autonomy reflected in interference with student admission, curriculum and research agenda from governments, the professions and industry. From lecturers' perspectives, the idea that academic pursuit can be entirely directed by them has largely disappeared. In research, what is permissible is often related to research group synergy – its justification is obtaining critical mass, a necessary condition of productivity in research activity under economic rationalism. The traditional community of scholars has been replaced with the hierarchy of administrators and rather than broad-based consensus founded on dialogue among stakeholders, economic rationalist principles encourage centralized structures and corporate style planning, implementation and control systems.

Not all universities have accepted their loss of autonomy. Some very specifically guard the role they play in scholarship and society. The University of Toronto recognizes that 'within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research. ...these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and the university itself. It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of his most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit' (University of Toronto, 2004). Cambridge University understands that collegiate university can bestow advantages through their interdisciplinary nature of colleges which acts as a major stimulus to teaching and learning, and its core value of freedom of thought and expression (Cambridge University, 2004). Freedom of enquiry and expression are among core values of the University of Newcastle, academic freedom to staff and students is safeguarded by Victoria University. Still in our sample, notions that autonomy and academic freedom are important academic principles were in a small minority. At least two major contributors to the demise of academic freedom, both unchecked by economic rationalist ideals, are that decision-

makers are motivated by *power*, their power, and the societal indoctrination that all things and all values must be subordinated to the marketplace: disagreement with it would turn the beholder into an instant heretic.

Economic rationalist principles of productivity also impact on the division of research and teaching. Despite the fact that as a sector many espouse to the nexus between knowledge accumulation by research and knowledge diffusion in the classroom, they separate the two for productivity gain. This may involve attracting the brightest researchers by allowing them the pursuit of research only, or setting up specific research groups with a view of conducting exclusively research activity. Productivity gains could be registered by such tactics and as research is the public face of the university, it will benefit from this effect. For students, given the demise of collegiality, the probability such knowledge is passed to teaching colleagues, with a view of being diffused in the classroom, is quite diminished.

Conclusions

Universities wishing to fulfil their purpose are challenged by the link of knowledge accumulation and diffusion. Some challenges - the notions of achieving truth and objectivity - are systemic. They cannot be eradicated, though collegiality, dialogue and egalitarian relationships can mitigate their impact. The last decades have seen the advent of a global concentration in the media able to indoctrinate millions with their brand of truth. During the same period, the value of proprietary knowledge as a foundation for sustainable competitive advantage to corporations has led to the constricting of commercially valuable information. The introduction of higher education to economic rationalist principles has further undermined the sector to fulfil its *raison d'être*.

In the face of such overwhelming forces our least resistance stance is understandable especially as change occurred incrementally, leading Faculty to largely abstain from voicing concern. Yet, failing to build countervailing strategic architecture and using our lobbying/negotiation powers with stakeholders, we will be increasingly in a position where we can only impart knowledge that is dated and has no commercial value. Business will become progressively the focus for research, and this will

ultimately undermine not just the desired nexus between research and teaching, but our ability to teach anything worthwhile at all. Through our silence we make the world a little darker as the inquiries that lifted mankind into the age of enlightenment often had no economic rationalist basis or they challenged very fundamentally the ‘truth’ that church or society subscribed to. We must not give up the important societal role our sector has played as custodian of knowledge.

Glossary

European Union - EU
Foreign Direct Investment - FDI
International Monetary Fund – IMF
Multinational Enterprise – MNE
Organization for Economic Corporation and Development - OECD
Research and Development – R&D
United Kingdom – UK
United States – US

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ⁱ The sacrosanct value of economic rationalism is greater efficiency which is achieved by unlocking key market forces, especially by increasing competition. Government intervention is frowned upon, and the market is purported to be self-correcting. Definition based on Whitwell 2004.

ⁱⁱ The researcher has selected the easiest population members from which to obtain the information. Definition of sampling method based on Kotler (1994, p105)

ⁱⁱⁱ Freedom of instruction – sometimes also translated as academic freedom

^{iv} Freedom of learning