

TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SELLING OUT?

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Abstract

Although changes to the Higher Education system are inevitable and, indeed, welcome, the steady drift towards assuming corporate identities and corporate practices is a lamentable and destructive feature of the changing educational landscape. Making a profit – the commodification of knowledge - necessarily becomes the driving force of an institution, instead of the production of knowledge for its own sake. The consequence is that higher educational institutions are now in the service of industry and business, undertaking projects and research on behalf of external “funders,” and doing so with misplaced pride. Certainly, academics should not be cloistered in their ivory towers; equally, though, they should avoid becoming cost centers themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION

Previously I have argued that institutions of higher education are being catapulted towards the oblivion of big business interests, and that they are at the mercy of the captains of industry. This presentation continues that theme, if only because the number of voices recognising the dangers is growing, albeit from different perspectives and with different goals in mind. A recent example is the reaction to the statement by Professor Jonathan Jansen, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, that our universities would disappear within 30 years. A minor debate erupted (to my mind rather ill advisedly because what Professor Jansen said is absolutely true). Professor Jansen (2004a) explained that our universities have become subservient to the demands of industry and government and that they are little more than institutions where teaching takes place rather than original research, one of the rewards of an academic career as it has been framed: “a perception that such a career [an academic one] would allow opportunities for self-motivated research” (Marsicano, Marques and Cukrowski, 1999:131). As instructive was the Minister of Education’s response to Professor Jansen’s assertions in his TB Davies speech:

“It is time to move on and acknowledge the need for state steering or regulation of higher education to ensure greater accountability for the use of public resources towards the attainment of broad policy goals. I also acknowledge that steering on its own will not be enough. Hence, my recent call to vice-chancellors that we need input from the creative genius of academics to inform and accelerate innovation and excellence in higher education” (Pandor, 2004).

2. THE PRESENT SITUATION

The constant bleating refrain that has been the catalyst for putting academe in a corporate straitjacket can be found in the above quote and it is a seductively irrefutable one:

society, the taxpayer, parents, guardians, all of them, want higher educational institutions to change, to ensure that Johnny and Janet are able to step into lucrative jobs, imbued immediately with knowledge and skills and wisdom. Consequently, the curriculum has had to change, and the methodologies, and the rhetoric. By speaking the arcane language of the current breed of curriculum developers, and by pandering to the choleric ideology of a loquacious (Jansen refers to "an impatient and aggressive [and] new") minister (Jansen, 2004b), educators have fallen into the trap set by a rather mercenary bunch, quasi-academics who should rather have embarked on careers in the production industry.

3. CORPORATISING

Academics have, generally, ceded control of their vocations to corporate managers. In fact, the control of learning is in the hands of managers who have, with alluring logic and insidious rhetoric, led scholars into accepting the vocabulary of the corporate world to further the ends of administrative goals rather than the exigencies of intellectual development. Alvin Toffler acknowledged the awakening of the corporates to the usefulness of becoming involved in education when he wrote:

Significantly, education is no longer merely a priority for parents, teachers, and a handful of education reformers, but for the advanced sectors of business as well, since its leaders increasingly recognise the connection between education and global competitiveness (1990:369).

Singh (2004) has remarked on the dangerous direction towards which Higher Education is veering, where (like Lansink) it is recognised that learning and knowledge are reduced to marketable commodities and students are clients and consumers within a corporate conglomerate. Singh also realises the danger that the well resourced institutions will continue to set the agenda as far as higher education is concerned and that, with institutions being more bent on achieving profits, the pursuit of knowledge would be secondary to the missions of educational institutions.

Favish, in similar fashion, also points out that "higher education is being re-fashioned primarily to serve corporate interests" (2003:25). To suit the corporate paradigm, universities have borrowed wholesale (and the word is used intentionally) from the business arena. The words "programme managers" and "school directors" trip glibly from academic lips. The university needs "branding" and "marketing". Jonathan Jansen (2004b) writes:

"But you may recognize another university in which the entire place has been transformed into a commercial center, the departments called 'cost-centres' and the students called 'clients'; in which every 'management' meeting is consumed with balancing the budget in the light of impending subsidy cuts; in which the response to external intervention is one of compliance and consent; in which the accumulation of larger and larger *numbers* of accredited publications is pursued with relentless vigour; in which teaching is equated with technology; and the

mechanics of research confused with the elegance of scholarship. Just about everyone in such a place is in the business of (ac)counting. Here, too, the university has long ceased to exist”.

Let us not forget, also, the "commodification of knowledge" about which Annette Lansink (<http://criticalmethods.org/p118.mv> accessed on 16 August 2004) writes:

“Commodification is the use of knowledge as a purchasable and saleable good. Instead of ensuring access to knowledge as a public good, commodification of knowledge "displaces the creation and passing on of knowledge from the social sphere to the sphere of production".

As Panton (2004) laments: “Worse, there is no challenge to the ongoing process of commodification of higher education, which has had a profound and destructive impact upon universities”. Rob Miller concurs when he writes (in a related context) that "colleges are basically factories, students are merely packages that can be moved around according to the needs and the priorities of capital" (2004).

4. BRANDING

As universities have to compete within a sector that seems hell bent on destroying itself, corporate managers have sold the idea of “branding” to their industrially minded academic counterparts, i.e. vice-chancellors, executive deans, and directors. Who drives these initiatives? The same question is asked, and answered, disarmingly, in the following way:

So who are the brand-builders and protectors in education? Clearly, the question of defining a brand probably rests at the very top of the university or college’s hierarchy. Senior management will have responsibility for maintaining the tangible basis for the success (or otherwise) of your brand, but the marketing department remains the engine room for the manifestation of the brand in visual images, written and spoken word. They will use prospectuses, advertising, exhibitions, and open days to position their brand personality in the prospective student’s mind (Euro RSCG Riley, 2004).

The question thus asked and answered is contained in the website of a marketing and communications business, Euro RSCG Riley, heavily engaged in building a marketing image for two universities, and no doubt hoping that more will follow.

Recall, then, when a famous South African rugby ground was named after a major sponsor, the outcry was deafening. Yet, we now have become inured to such practices, e.g. Securicor Loftus. One wonders how long it will be before we see the University of the Widget Cape Town, or the University of the Blogger Witwatersrand?

Together with branding goes marketing. This effort will be aimed at snaring the decreasing pool of learners (newspeak for students). The trend will be to increase the number of staff populating the Public Relations office and then to either rename the office or to create a new one called....Marketing. Ensuring the success of this stage of the

enterprise will be the responsibility of more bureaucrats who will be tasked with compiling league tables. In other words, the reputation of an institution will depend on data crunched extrapolated from all kinds of sources.

5. DOING BUSINESS

When it comes to doing business with business, universities are particularly rotten. And when it comes to doing business with the government, well, universities are unmentionably cowardly. But this is to be expected within a system where institutional autonomy is a leftover scrap of rhetoric harking back to the 19th and 20th centuries.

Governments and their functionaries will obviously express surprise, shock, anger and chagrin when informed that universities are developing and implementing strategies to ensure a higher throughput of students. The result of a funding policy premised on throughput is an inevitable decline in standards. Take an excerpt from an article on dumbing down in higher education (Baty, 2004):

First-hand evidence of the widespread dumbing down of academic standards has emerged in an exclusive *Times Higher* survey. Academics reported that they were teaching students who were not capable of benefiting from degree-level study and that they had been forced to pass students who did not deserve it - as university managers struggled to maintain student numbers and teaching budgets. The "dumbing down" internet survey of *Times Higher* readers with teaching and marking responsibilities undertaken over the past month also found that most academics agreed that their universities had become increasingly tolerant of student absenteeism. Almost half said that their department had cut important curriculum areas because they were too expensive to teach.

Outsourcing services is already a growing phenomenon. It is easy to understand why security services, catering services, cleaning and horticultural services and so on are outsourced. After all, these are no longer thought of as core business. But, another service being outsourced is the second pillar of a higher educational institution's business, viz. research, only it isn't called outsourcing - that seems too mundane a term - no, instead it is called contract research. Thus the research mission of a university, for example, is no longer directed by the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake but rather to supplement the coffers of the institution and at the behest of corporate clients, usually with deep pockets. An example of how easily an institutions ethics can be swayed by a wealthy client is found in the Louisrus water pollution saga. Louisrus is an area in Vanderbijlpark within sight of the eternally burning flame and smoke of Iscor, the giant steel manufacturing conglomerate. The residents of Louisrus found that their plants were dying and that various members of the community were suffering from a variety of illnesses. It was concluded that the groundwater extracted by means of boreholes had become contaminated and that the alleged culprit was Iscor. The University of Potchefstroom (now North West) became involved, assisting the Louisrus community with legal advice. Iscor objected and, it is alleged, informed the university that they would withdraw their funding of certain projects should the university not distance itself from the

lawsuit. The university acquiesced. The following report by Elize Tempelhoff (2001) describes a part of this egregious surrender:

The Centre for Community Rights and Development [part of the university] has meanwhile stopped all aid to the LIG [Louisrus Interest Group] because they saw the university's aid as a conflict of interest.

Iscor annually contributes millions of rands to the university. The industry has made a contribution of more than R1 million to the university's distance-learning centre, erected on the Vaal Triangle campus several years ago. A large part of the engineering building on the main campus was also sponsored by Iscor.

6. MANAGERIALISM

There has always been a tension between administrative/technical/auxiliary staff and the academics of an institution. Fixed hours of office duty and precisely demarcated periods of leave of absence are assigned to administrative staff. But academics are free to come and go as they please. As the business of learning has changed to edge closer to the business of business, it has become easier to develop workload models. It is only when academic faculty activities can be reduced to figures that the suits may be mollified. So articles such as those by Marsicano, Marques and Cukrowski (1999) appear (we hasten to add, at this juncture that it is not the intention of this contribution to malign the article in question.) The argument for the development of a workload model is craftily initiated by invoking uncontested truths such as "the drive to broaden access" (1999:131) in South African universities. This accessibility would rely on teaching staff having to adjust their strategies to accommodate learners with potential by providing additional assistance. The teaching workload increases, and with it the administrative workload. A concomitant increase in salaries is not, however, even considered because, you see, enough propaganda has been disseminated to induce academics into thinking that their's is a profession founded on the noble principles of charity and selfless devotion.

Annette Lansink (2004) writes about this new managerialism, which, together with rationalisation (read: retrenchments) and mergers is

...part of an international discourse of 'privatizing' public higher education - this language takes the form of limiting public expenditure and placing greater reliance on private donors and higher tuition fees. In addition, the private sector is expanding with 'for profit' universities. Contrary to the ideals of democratization and massification of higher education, the impact of privatization on access will be devastating. Larger segments of the population (disproportionately affecting black learners) will not be able to pursue higher education, whereas the need for a *critical mass of intellectuals* (emphasis added) and productive employment is rapidly increasing.

7. NOT ALL BAD

But the picture is not completely bad. The reason is that society and educators may become so fed up with the NQF, OBE and the parochial approach to education that a revolution of thought may yet take place. Why is this possible? Because academics are becoming increasingly unionised. As they have been pushed and prodded into accepting restrictions on privileges and as their rights have been abrogated, a new breed of academic has slowly emerged from an antediluvian slumber. This kind of academic now refuses to participate in academic processions that take place after hours – unless compensation is awarded. This kind of academic refuses to mark scripts and assignments after hours – unless compensation is awarded. This kind of academic increasingly questions the promotion of non-academic staff without being subjected to the same standards as academics.

8. TRENDS

In addition to the above, Carol Twigg and Michael Miloff predicted, in 1998, that schools and universities would be drastically changed and that the educational system itself would be transformed radically. They also saw the following trends:

- The number of students is still growing.
- Different types of students are asking for education; participation of women, older students, and students from ethnic minorities is growing. Different students bring different experiences with them.
- Increasingly, work and study are combined, and that leads to a need for more flexible learning arrangements in which the campus or school building is no longer central to the educational process.
- More generally, there is a trend towards lifelong learning.
- Lifelong learning leads to an emphasis on "learning to learn". Knowledge becomes obsolete at an ever-increasing rate in a knowledge economy, and knowledge workers need to be able to refresh their knowledge on a regular basis.
- Because of the differences between students, there is a need to accommodate different learning styles, customization and alternative learning routes. Courses have to take more into account the different experiences and backgrounds of students.
- Higher education institutions have long had a monopoly in providing education, but increasingly, companies and public bodies possess knowledge that can be reused for educational purposes, partly for in-house training (knowledge management) but also to offer to external markets.

- Education is under constant budget pressure, thus there is a need for more efficient and effective education.
- Students more and more are behaving like consumers who want to make informed choices about how and where they want to be educated, which implies students are no longer committed to one institution.
- Teaching staff will exhibit more job-hopping behavior than they did in the past.
- There are too many dropouts in the current educational system.

Further to these predictions one could add:

- An erosion in ethical values;
- Internationalisation
- Decreasing autonomy
- Increasing unionisation and activism

9. QUO VADIS?

Where do we go now? As much as this paper may seem to argue for a reactionary return to the autocratic rule of professors and their effete withdrawal from society like the cave dwellers of Qumran, I hasten to express an utter distaste for the dispassionate disengagement of some academics from their core role which I consider to be that of empathetic mentor and supervisor. In brief, what I argue for is a return to values and norms founded on the lofty ideals of the pursuit of knowledge co-operatively between students and educators while the system flushes out managers, administrators and other corporate types.

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