

## **Editorial**

# **In Search of the Character of Twenty-first Century Higher Education**

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Even if one does not subscribe to the viewpoint that there is a 'crisis' within higher education, it is undeniable that at present academia and higher education institutions in many nations are experiencing a difficult time, financially as well as intellectually, in respect to institutions' standing and purpose in society. As universities have undergone significant evolution and change since first being established over 1000 years ago, this is not something entirely new. The writings of eminent scholars, thinkers and politicians document a long-standing discourse and conflicting views on what exactly is the purpose of universities and higher education. Broadly generalising, one can distinguish two extreme views at either end of a spectrum ranging from general self-fulfilment to vocational training. In other words, at one end are those (e.g. von Humboldt, ca 1793; Newman, 1854/1999) who define the purpose of the university as developing individuals' critical minds and personalities (morals) to create citizens capable of serving their nation and humanity as whole and support the development of more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic societies (e.g. Dahrendorf, 1979). At the other end of the spectrum we find those who assign the university a service function to the state and the economy with a duty to teach and train the workforce providing skills development, and supporting technological advances. Theoretically, self-fulfilling pursuit of disinterested research and knowledge creation, and economic value must not be necessarily mutually exclusive. And so, modern views imply that universities can, have and should fulfil a variety of functions; they should be "multiversities" as George Fallis former dean of York University (Toronto, Canada) recently stated and the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) implicitly suggests.

Many academics fundamentally support a tripartite higher education mission consisting of a mix of research, teaching and outreach/service a.k.a. third mission – despite individuals' struggles to balance associated workloads and conflicts. There is reluctant admission that any individual may not be able to perform equally well on each of those aspects - something which is slowly recognised in universities' appraisal procedures and promotion criteria. Nevertheless, as organisations – universities can address the multitude of functions outlined above within certain limits and given the proper conditions, support and circumstance. And it is perhaps insufficiently recognised how many of today's academics already successfully combine a variety of purposes in their day-to-day work, for instance, by supporting students' skills development to

facilitate their employability upon graduation while also upholding the notion that higher education should offer more than mere professional qualification and training. Articles in this issue provide examples of teaching approaches devised by academics, which allow them to convey relevant applicable professional knowledge while also fostering students' personal development beyond and above the subject matter. Mary Hardie's article describing 'An inquiry-based learning approach to teaching about planning regulations' offers an illustration of how an educator seeks to go beyond the career focused learning typically demanded for vocational degrees at 'new universities'. Hardie aims to stimulate students' critical thinking and appreciation of values, stakeholder conflicts and wider issues around development and planning. Similarly, Peel and Posas demonstrate in their reflections on their award-winning module that academics have the capacity, freedom and desire to stretch basic requirements of skills teaching by incorporating inclusivity in urban design and dealing with disabilities in the curriculum. The original module's purpose was to teach planning students effective communication skills; the modified module discussed here simultaneously questions societal values, provides information on the UK's Disability Act and requires participants to actively engage with the new legislation and learning disabled.

Aside from embracing multiple purposes – the character of universities in this day and age is also shaped by rapid growth with ever increasing proportions of the population seeking access to higher education. Naturally, this has implications on the character of universities and university lifestyles. In order to keep the costs for this expansion in check, governments (and institutions) are adopting more or less willingly the notion that universities themselves should behave like for-profit enterprises whose operations must be optimised, streamlined and made more effective and efficient. More students need to be taught and supported with relatively fewer staff. Here, Cathy Higgs' paper on 'The use of e-assessment to provide formative feedback for quantification' supplies an example of how the intelligent use of technology will allow us to create efficiencies without a reduction of the quality of student learning. Nonetheless, while discerning use of technology and careful review of course contents and pedagogy can go a long way towards a positive student learning experience, such efficiencies are not limitless.

Moreover, a kind of utilitarian perspective of higher education seems to gain the upper hand in which universities are seen as production facilities – the product being the quality graduate necessary to keep our economies competitive and running. The language and terminology increasingly prevalent to describe the sector is that of industry, manufacturing and management. Universities are seen as (service) *industry* whose task it is to *produce* high quality graduates (the product). Following this logic, institutions and academics are blamed if the product is not up to scratch, i.e. if too many students fail and/or do not seem to have acquired the 'right' skills for the economy. Another result of such language and attitude is a growing consumer culture toward education where students (and parents) complain about a lack of service and inadequate value for tuition fees.

Liessmann (2006) has warned of the fallacy of such approaches, suggesting that our efforts to create masses of learned and knowledgeable individuals in an industrialised fashion threatens to transform learned academics into clerks, administrators and workers. It is important not to forget that education and knowledge are hardly products in a traditional sense; they are perhaps best comparable to health and fitness. Membership in a health and fitness club by itself will not automatically bestow fitness; it requires an individual's commitment and long term engagement with exercise to achieve some level of fitness. And, while a good programme and perhaps a personal trainer (i.e. tutor) can facilitate progress, neither can guarantee sporting success. There is no question that in the right environment and with the right stimuli it is easier to stay healthy and fit, but like health and fitness, education should be recognised as a cherished good that has to be earned with a responsible attitude, discipline, commitment and active engagement. Finally, education, like fitness, requires time; there is little room for quick fixes. This is where Jenny Muir's paper provides valuable food for thought and a call for restraint toward overzealous university managers. There is increasingly pressure on institutions to monitor students' attendance at sessions so as to guarantee success. However, what is overlooked here is the responsibility of the independent learner to engage in his or her studies. Students have different learning styles and preferences – how can we punish those that do not attend because they prefer individual study over a lecture? And, while students feel that non-attendees should be punished in some way, rewarding attendance itself seems wrong as it does not in itself bestow any competency.

In sum, universities today are increasingly asked to provide more and differentiated functions to more students than ever before – however institutions will also increasingly fall short of fulfilling all expectations if society is unwilling to accept that knowledge creation, societal critique and scholarship require time, resources, autonomy and freedom, not rigid norms and standardised performance targets. The limited functionality of universities in totalitarian regimes can possibly be taken as example of what happens in too stringently controlled circumstances – and it is questionable whether this is anybody's aim.

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A. Frank: In Search of the Character of Twenty-first Century Higher Education

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