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Abstract

The paper describes and analyses the environment in Australian universities since the changes initiated under the Labor government in 1988 by John Dawkins. It looks at the role and interplay of ideas in the changing intellectual culture in universities, in particular the common effect of the ideas of both liberal economics and postmodernism, and the tensions between corporate values and open enquiry. It raises the issues of the extent to which universities should have a distinct set of values from wider society, and the basis upon which universities should exist as distinctive institutions.

Keywords

universities, intellectual, culture, liberal, economics, postmodernism, change, commercialisation, conformity, research, diversity, values, market, society, corporate, free speech

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DON'T DO WHAT AUSTRALIA HAS DONE

Rodney Nilsen

On 7th July 2004 I received a message from an academic colleague in Israel, which included the following passage.

The Technion and other Israeli universities are currently engaged in a very difficult and apparently crucial debate about how to respond to a number of demands from political spheres to change their structure and relinquish a considerable part of their current authority to run their own institutions. There is considerable apprehension that the effect will be very damaging to academic standards and level of research. A number of people have drawn attention to what happened in Australia with the changes instigated by John Dawkins in 1988It would be very interesting and helpful for me to hear any updated thoughts that you have, from your own experiences from inside the Australian academic environment and also any impressions or data that you have concerning the effect of the changes introduced by Dawkins on research activities etc., also beyond the academic spheres. I guess I am looking for information not only about the effect on the daily lives of working academics, important though that may be for us all, but also on the effects on society at large.

The following letter is an edited and expanded version of my reply.

18th August, 2004

Dear Michael,

I'not sure from your e-mail just what it is the government has said it wishes to do concerning the changes in higher education in Israel, and even if it has said so, that does not necessarily mean that that is what it really intends or even that it knows what it really intends. However, I would not take at face value any statement that it merely wants to improve higher education, for there are many different notions of "improvement". The following remarks concern the Australian system as a whole, not particularly my own institution. Of course, the situation has a good deal in common, to varying extents, with other Western countries.

In Australia the Dawkins policy changes were enunciated in 1988. They have taken years to filter through the system, and in my view have only really started to "bite" in the last seven or eight years. The policies have been pursued equally by both Labor and Liberal, the more recent Liberal government has simply carried them further in their logical direction, given the underlying ideology common to both parties in this area.

The Dawkins changes had the following main components: reducing government funding on a per capita basis, forcing universities to become more financially independent from government, increasing the number of students, removing distinctions between different tertiary education institutions (so that Colleges of Advanced Education became universities), introducing new techniques for the paying of fees by students, "commercialisation" of universities both in terms of their teaching programs and their research, the indirect control of universities by means of a language of conformity which reflected government values and ideology, and a concern with "top down" management.

The effects and consequences across the system have varied in extent, but the same pressures have been felt throughout. These include changes in staffing profiles with many staff now being more vocational than intellectual (it is no longer essential for a Vice-Chancellor to have a serious academic reputation); a debased and mediocre language in policy statements, verging on "propaganda" at the height of its abuse, so as to indicate conformity with government policies and a hope of corresponding rewards; a "dumbing down" of the university environment in purely intellectual terms; a proliferation of management procedures supposedly designed to "assure" quality etc., leading to a trivialization of the role of the academic; a failure of Orwellian proportions to pay attention to the meaning of words, since the words are to function purely as a sign of conformity; and so on.

There was however, one plus in all of this in my view---it did lead to a more responsible attitude to teaching, which is often neglected within the research environment, but this attitude was often quite misguided, leading to an obsession with procedures, student evaluation of staff, and technology (that is, the use of computers in teaching) rather than with actual teaching and scholarship. This is still the current state. It also is hard to avoid the feeling that there are different criteria for promotion from before, even though these may not be explicit. Promotion and appointment at a senior level now may represent a corporate accolade recognizing conformity with the goals of the organization, rather than an individual intellectual or academic achievement.

The state is one of cultural confusion, with an unresolved tension, barely discussed, between more traditional intellectually-based research and a range of other activities now considered to constitute research (for example market research), and how they should be valued. Excellence and mediocrity, and everything in between, are now entwined and jumbled up, with few distinctions. Researchers now are to be regarded primarily as "advanced technicians" whose activities and goals should largely be determined by others. The government's viewpoint is that researchers should attract outside funds for their research and concentrate on shorter-term problems with an immediate benefit to society; while the universities regard researchers as responsible for gaining funds and projecting a research "image" which enhances their perception by government and the public. There is virtually no serious discussion of what could or should be the role of universities, let alone any agreement.

Universities in Australia succumbed weakly over an extended period to all these pressures, the "supine slaves of blind authority" as Shelley puts it, and as "mammals without backbones" as I think you said one of your colleagues referred to the situation in Israel---this is partly what I had in mind when I said to you once that I thought any

society would succumb to manipulative or even inhumane pressures under the “right” circumstances. However, from a detached viewpoint, viewing the changes in Australian universities has been a fascinating study in the human tendency to thoughtlessly conform to political pressures, and to judge personal and institutional success by the extent to which such conformity is attained.

On the wider front, universities are now under ever increasing pressure to be much like the rest of society, operating under a corporate system of values, and behave like businesses. Consequently, the diversity of institutions in society has been reduced. The potential of universities to act as (virtually the only possible) institutions examining society using the intellect as the primary tool, with truth as the goal, has been sharply reduced. Whether one thinks this is a good or a bad thing depends upon the view one takes of society and its purposes. For an admirer of Edmund Burke, as I am, society is seen as a complex and delicate balance between conflicting tendencies, and preserving the diversity of institutions in society provides a balance and a protection against extremes. This is even more the case because we do not understand in any depth what enables society to function, as Burke recognized. The critical examination of society in the broad sense, and the possibility of honouring the human and even the numinous (for a commitment to rational enquiry requires an act of faith) through the fuller use of the potential of the mind, is one important thing a university can offer society.

I think the Dawkins policies have intellectually diminished Australian society as a whole, with public life and discussion concentrating less on actual issues and becoming more boring and trivial as opinions and argument are perceived merely as the views of self interested factions or individuals---a symptom of this is that often there is more discussion on the *politics* of an issue, rather than on the issue itself.

On a more general level, I think one can say that when market economics is conventionally applied to higher education, intellectual values are reduced to market value and education becomes a mere commodity, as befits the conception of education as a process of training for the existing demands of society. Now it might be argued that there is a distinction between market value and popular demand, and what might have value based on other criteria. But this is a complex issue, and from the viewpoint of practical policy in the universities the question of making such a distinction hardly arises, especially in an environment of severe financial constraint. The current ideas on university policy may still have a long way to run, for although the allocation of student places is still regulated to an extent, there is considerable pressure to open up the system more to full economic competition. The arguments for doing this may have some merit, but in the absence of counterbalancing ideas, such policy is certain to lead to a sharpening of the problems I describe.

Once intellectual values have been reduced to market values, there is no reason to have a distinctive institution, namely The University, to reflect intellectual values and the notions of objectivity and truth and then, from the point of view of general public awareness, those values may cease to exist. Indeed, even within the university itself, postmodern thought effectively asserts this as being the case, and questions even the possibility of disinterested enquiry. Thus, in intellectual terms, postmodernism and market economics, when applied to the sphere of the intellect, produce very much the

same situation, for both have the effect of reducing valid argument to mere opinion, and the attainment of insight to nothing more than individual preference and a question of how it is perceived and by how many. The only difference is that postmodernism achieves this effect by a direct attack, whereas liberal economics does it indirectly and by implication, often with a total lack of awareness of what it is doing.

We could conclude from this that market economics, as applied to the intellectual sphere, is not “conservative” at all, but rather is as radical and subversive as postmodern thought set out to be. Alternatively, we could conclude that postmodern thought, for all its “radical” and “subversive” pretensions, is merely an application of the ideas of market forces and individual convenience to the world of the intellect. Of course, both have the same effect of trivializing the serious life of the mind. Nor is this effect to be found only in the universities, for in the wider sphere, it reveals itself in the gradual draining of any sort of communal meaning and purpose to society, with Mrs. Thatcher's dictum “there is no such thing as society” as the logical conclusion. Perhaps the only exception to this is that when national survival appears to be at stake, for example due to a threat of terrorism, the notion of society and its common values may assert itself again, but only in the most immediate and self-concerned way.

Now, it would be a mistake to imagine that Dawkins was solely responsible for the changes in our universities---my view is that there were and continue to be strong external and internal pressures within societies like Australia to make such changes. The issue has many aspects, but society is now incredibly complex from both the technological and commercial point of view. Apart from funding issues and the wish to reduce government spending at all costs, changes in universities are driven by the need for more training (not education) to respond to this complexity---but it is not an intellectual complexity, it's a purely technical complexity. So we see an increasing technical complexity and sophistication, but a decreasing level of serious thought and discussion. But the increasing technical complexity of society imposes a need for people to be trained to manage that complexity, and thus there is an inexorable pressure to change the traditional function of universities.

However, the technical problems we are likely to face, now and in the future, require a response that needs to be more than merely technical. Whereas at one time the universities might have provided such a resource, their subjugation to the immediate needs of society, as perceived by government, means there is much less chance of that possibility in the future. The fundamental issue facing university policy makers should be how to maintain a humane and serious intellectual culture in universities, a culture which should not be under continual siege as it is at present, while at the same time recognizing the pressures which exist and the necessity to respond to them.

Some universities now pride themselves on being “corporate” institutions. It is not quite clear what they mean by this, and an issue rarely mentioned is that if universities are indeed corporate institutions, are academic staff expected to automatically conform to the corporate goals of the institution, as in a business corporation? Some universities in Australia apparently thought “yes”, and have introduced policies restricting the free speech of academic staff in circumstances where a staff member's affiliation might be evident--this meant that the autonomy and freedom of

academics to speak out on matters of concern to wider society was curtailed, so as to avoid any possible “embarrassment” to the university as a corporate institution. Academics were expected to concentrate on their own, presumably limited, area of expertise, thus reinforcing the idea of the academic and researcher as a technician. All of this was an acquiescence by universities in sharply reducing the role of The University, an acquiescence which received virtually no discussion.

But if the “corporate university” is hardly distinguishable from a business corporation, one has to ask: upon what basis should universities exist? And, if we think that universities *should* exist, in what sense are they to be different from other institutions in society? The extent to which universities should have (some at least) different values from society at large is a fundamental question which has received little serious discussion in Australian public life, and a reason for this is that the level of discussion such an issue requires is hardly possible any longer. The “dumbing down” of public discussion and debate has meant that the capacity of society to discuss and perhaps resolve complex issues is no longer possible. Universities, having once led the way on the content and standards of public discussion, even if only tenuously and intermittently, now simply follow them.

An indication of how we should regard The University comes from Burke's view of the state, as found in his *Reflections of the Revolution in France*. He says (my italics):

Society is, indeed, a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure; but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with *other reverence*; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in all virtue and in all perfection.

Burke's exalted view of the state sits uneasily with the prosaic materialism and spiritual void of our own culture, especially when our society tends to identify the state with politics. But the liberal economic mind is indifferent to Burke's challenge, and sees universities as mere objects for potential microeconomic change. If The University can be regarded with that *other reverence* to which Burke refers, only then will it be worth preserving as a separate institution with a distinctness from wider society.

Your message raises complex issues and my thoughts here are by no means complete. However, on a positive note, I think the human need to seriously inquire and understand means that a serious academic culture is not that easy to eradicate, even if it can be greatly diminished. It is still possible to do serious intellectual work in Australian universities if one is determined enough and one does not necessarily expect much formal recognition. Students, even when they are not all that capable, still become committed to their studies in the right circumstances, and forget to ask about any personal benefit they might receive. As Plato shows in *The Meno*,

everybody can learn and the joy in learning can lead to forgetfulness of the more mundane demands of society, and even to a humane exultation in the powers of the mind.

For a country like Israel, I would have thought an awareness of history would be a more potent force in policy matters than it is in Australia. And history has examples of how universities, by becoming mere mouthpieces of government, have aided and abetted dictatorships, as Israel well knows.

Finally, here is a joke of mine about the Dawkins changes in Australia.

Question: What was the difference between the Chinese cultural revolution and the Australian cultural revolution?

Answer: In China, the intellectuals were removed from the universities and forced to work as peasants in the countryside; in Australia the peasants were removed from the countryside and became intellectuals in the universities.

Best wishes,

Rod

Rodney Nilsen teaches and conducts research in pure mathematics at The University of Wollongong, where he is also the Chair of the joint University of Wollongong/Illawarra Area Health Service Human Research Ethics Committee. This paper was originally submitted to Quadrant Magazine under the title "A letter to Israel concerning John Dawkins". It was subsequently published under the title given here.