

Chapter 17

Universities: Sixty Years of Change

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Universities then, as they are now, and as they might be

Underlying my depiction of universities as they once were and as they now are is the inescapable fact that universities of any era and in any location are components of the ecosystem or society in which they find themselves. They fulfil the functions that their society expects of them. Like it or not, neoliberalism is espoused by major political parties all over the Western world; taxes are minimized, public expenditure is minimized, services are handed over to the private sector – and let market forces prevail. This applies to universities, as it does to banking, merchandising and mining.

In that light, universities aren't doing a bad job: public expenditure on universities has fallen from nearly total to under half, while participation rates are high and rising. The public cost per student is a fraction of what it was, yet standards in the workplace of such professions as paramedical, hospitality and the arts, for example, are rising (or should be) as entrants to those professions now have university degrees whereas previously they did not – but I have to add that many would regard this development as regressive in some professions such as nursing. The quality of teaching and learning, so bad ten or so years ago, is now recognised as a priority and is improving, but in some universities much more than in others. Maybe those ubiquitous market forces will sort that one out in due course. In short, universities are part of our society and seem to be doing a reasonable job in preparing peoples for that society.

However, neoliberal economics, which sees everything as driven by the marketplace for corporate profit, is not what I amongst many others would see that society is all about or should be about. Fruitful and humane societies cannot live by the dollar alone. A society should also be about such other things as social obligation and environmental sustainability. Just as Keynesian economics was a passing phase with its very different implications for society and for the place of universities in society so neoliberalism is a passing phase. For it is certain that the economic and industrial basis for society has to change. A society that bases its existence on annual and increasing economic growth, using non-renewable resources, is inevitably facing extinction: the law of the conservation of matter makes that obvious.

We urgently need a kind of institution that can undertake the sort of basic research that a healthy, sustainable and ever-changing society needs to carry out: an institution that takes on the charge of building on our knowledge both of the physical world and of humankind, that may have no immediate or even foreseeable pay-off, and that makes such knowledge publicly available and not hidden as commercial-in-confidence. This sort of institution would likewise be a component in the eco-system of society but it would be a different society, one that values quality of life, social justice and environmental sustainability.

John Ralston Saul makes the point that currently western governments are in management mode, which is inimical to true democracy.¹ Democracy is based on thoughtful debate and openness to change whereas in the present climate change is vehemently resisted even when – especially when – we are facing economic catastrophe. He gave this striking example. Neoliberal economics led to the banks grossly over-lending on unsecured mortgages. Those responsible for this reckless decision-making weren't punished, rather they were charged with fixing the very problem that they themselves had created. Instead of governments then taking the pressure off the people whose mortgages were now unmanageable, they instead poured hundreds of billions of dollars of public money, taxpayers' money, into propping up the failed private banks. It would have been far cheaper, and better for the banks themselves, Ralston Saul argued, if the government had taken over those mortgages. People would then have money to keep the economy going and the banks would have remained sustainable. But instead of questioning the economic theory that had led to the global financial crisis, the 'solution' to the problem was more of the same – to everyone's detriment except the extremely wealthy few whose greed and locked-in thinking had created the problem.

Resistance to accepting the science on climate change and to what might be done to mitigate it is another example. Those with a vested interest in maintaining our dependence on fossil fuels that the best science tells us is causing global warming is to confuse the issue. Rustle up a few rogue scientists, many of whom have links with the fossil fuel and mining industries, and demand equal time in the best post-modern manner – and to whom the press frequently give much more than equal time – and call carbon pricing 'a great big toxic tax', to quote one prominent politician. The public become confused and what three years ago they saw as a top priority, is now just another tax and to be avoided. And so we continue with the status quo, its dangers to our very planet swept under the corporate carpet.

¹ John Ralston Saul, 'The reinvention of the world - It's broke: How can we fix it? The University of Tasmania, 27th August, 2012

The solution is education, it has to be. The sort of education that Ralston Saul says makes people think, not the sort that trains them for jobs and the sort of skills that serve the status quo. Current educational institutions are founded on, and operate by, the very neoliberal economy that needs replacing. We need to rethink where we are with respect to higher education. The new model for universities would be more than just the traditional model of free and open research and teaching. The new university would also need to be an agent for changing society by educating students so that they can think at a meta-theoretical level, enabling them to challenge the linear paradigms that lock us into unsustainable policies. That is not what existing universities are doing while they are in managerial mode, where the order of the day is to put in place on-line strategies for cost-effectively achieving managerially imposed institutional outcomes. No radical ideas, please.

Ralston Saul sees a properly functioning university system as basic to our survival, a university system that helps people to think outside the square, that challenges the self-serving dogmas created by the corporate world, not one that tunes the graduate attributes it hopes to foster to the demands of the corporate world. The higher education sector is where new paradigms for society should be being developed – which is unlikely in present institutional climates that are part of the eco-system of a neoliberal society.

I am not recommending a return to the pre-Dawkins tertiary sector: indeed, the contents of this book would discourage that suggestion. Students emerging from our traditional universities have their paradigm-busting potential nested in the highly specialised areas in which they did their PhDs. This is of course highly desirable in itself but we need to go further than that, to question the paradigms that run society itself: to operate at an extended abstract level across a broad front, to put it in SOLO terms. This is close to what Vice-Chancellor Steven Schwartz simply calls ‘wisdom’.² Schwartz proposes that final year students do a capstone course, called ‘Practical Wisdom’, in which they are required to reflect in the broadest terms on what they have acquired over the whole of their university studies that hopefully would lead to a lifelong pursuit for the getting of wisdom. One final year project is obviously not enough, although it is undoubtedly a good start. This sort of broad, extended abstract thinking needs to be fostered in quite a different climate from the utilitarian, job focused, cost-effective university that is so common today. However, such an open-ended education is clearly not for everybody.

² Schwartz, S. ‘Restoring wisdom to universities.’ 2010 Annual Lecture, Macquarie University.
<http://www.vc.mq.edu.au/speeches.php>

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Indeed many would see it as a waste of time and resources. But such an education is sorely needed to offset the closed-loop thinking that is a function of our monetarist society.

Universities were previously acknowledged as the home of the academic as social critic, but that role has recently and deliberately been trivialised as an ineffectual pastime for effete latté sipping elites. Such mockery arises out of the linear locked-in thinking that the powerful need if they are to preserve the status quo for their own ends. Current universities are primarily designed to serve the job market that currently exists, and given that people need to be prepared for jobs, that is inevitable and desirable. But that is not about the getting of wisdom, which is what at least some institutes of higher education should be about.

The needs, financing, administration and governance of institutions designed to teach professional and vocational courses to around half those leaving school are one thing. The needs, financing, administration and governance of institutions in which research and teaching in the basic disciplines, and in which the role of academic as social critic is deliberately fostered rather than suppressed, are very much another.

Ralston Saul asserts that progress is about finding faults with the present system. For society to improve, we have to admit that we have problems; if we cannot admit this then change and progress become impossible. We need to point out what those problems are, and to suggest ways forward, which is exactly what the role of the academic as social critic would do. It is a role that has a long history, back to Socrates' Athens, but it is one that we have lost in higher education as it mostly is today.

The major flaw in today's universities is that we are trying to do the academic task with a monetarist set of values. That is not good alignment. Give half or more of school leavers postsecondary education by all means, and given the scale of that task, public funding in full is impractical. But that is not giving us the kind of institution that will instil the wisdom needed for a healthy, progressive and changing society.

How universities are to get from where they are at present to where they should be in order to serve a sustainable and just society is the massive educational challenge that we face. Traditional universities in their inefficient and bumbling way had something like that noble end in sight but they lost their direction sufficiently to be attacked and taken over by the neoliberal right. Now, most universities are simply vocational colleges that serve society-as-it-is, under fairly tight managerial constraints. Desirable and even essential as that last task is, it is not what universities are for, are uniquely capable of doing, and must do for the sake of producing a just and sustainable world.