TRANSFORM

CAN THE CRITICALLY ENGAGED UNIVERSITY OF THE FUTURE

FIND UNITY IN DIVERSITY?

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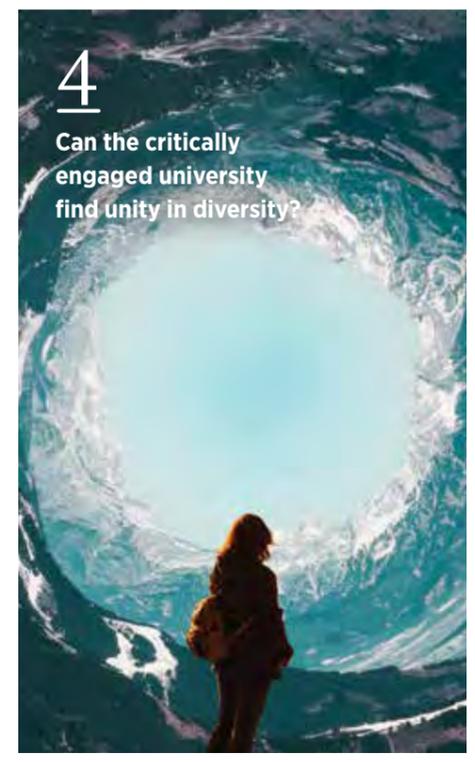
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Can the critically engaged university find unity in diversity?

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| INTRODUCTION

CAN THE CRITICALLY ENGAGED UNIVERSITY FIND UNITY IN DIVERSITY?

PROFESSOR JIM NYLAND – EDITOR

INTRODUCTION

This edition is challenged by Professor Glyn Davis' notable valediction in response to receiving the AFR Higher Education Lifetime Achievement Award to get to the next emerging stage of engagement for Australian universities.

The emerging theme is that 'engagement' is a very diverse concept (research, teaching, learning and social analysis are all involved); it is more a framework or a 'field' of action and analysis than a single conceptual entity.

Nevertheless it must have form and shape, and its own intellectual definition and integrity, which can bind the diverse and varied content within a focussed perspective. Whereas some single institutions have managed this, often as a function and consequence of outstanding leadership (pace Davis and Melbourne) we

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now face the need to scale up and broadcast what has been learned and to define what needs to be done. This is important if change is to be brought about in a coherent way potentially for the sector as a whole. A number of key themes have emerged from Davis' reflections over his career as Vice Chancellor that highlight the importance of finding 'unity in diversity' and these issues are some of those that face us as we seek to mould the critically engaged university of the future.

WHO IS NEEDED?

Well, VCs probably, but also the whole institution, which should surely have democratic and not just patriarchal authority. A figurehead is a deeply symbolic role and can be used for transformative as well as conservative purposes. A university should be a collegium with co-operative and collaborative ethics at its core. As Davis

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argues, 'strategy' is key and it must be adequately represented symbolically. How to do so for engagement is our question and here the 'triple helix' of research, education and engagement, morphed with colliding disciplines, symbolises a strategy which is good and right and proper! Firth's piece shows what some of the engagement processes and issues are looking like as engagement evolves in Australia, and previous contributors to this journal (Nyland and Davies, 2017) have stressed some of the educational and curriculum issues that are emerging. The challenge for Engagement Australia is to find unity in such diversity. Welch and Saltmarsh's important contribution to this issue of the journal points the way to the possible use of an inventory as a strategic planning tool for Australian engagement. Such an approach could provide us with an evaluative and critical framework, give us a coherent focus for action, and it could demonstrate realities on the ground in each HE institution that we can manage and develop. What must be acknowledged, however, is the pressing need for social analysis and critique, which must underpin our work at Transform. Firth's article suggests we need to have the right strategy in place (highlighting the fact that a major pilot project involving nine Australian universities is underway to potentially adopt and adapt the Carnegie Classification Engagement system for the sector), whilst Bell argues for an engaged university centred on notions of the public good, an agenda which addresses the 'disruptions' of globalisation. She goes on to offer us a visualization of different models which portray what she sees as the emerging and damaging diversity.

TRIPLE HELIX AT A CROSSROADS?

As a result we find ourselves at a crossroads, what Bell refers to as a 'tipping point' where we must re-imagine what it means to be a critically engaged university. However, there are problems, firstly with the concept of engagement. We are not sufficiently clear about the things we are supposed to be engaged with, including the idea of 'community' itself. And yet universities think of themselves as being part of 'the community'. The learning and teaching we now have in conventional universities is not sufficiently engaged with the critical issues facing our society. At the personal level, for many people learning and education as well as politics fail to address the big questions such as what makes a fair society, who belongs in a society or community and who gets left behind in a global world where older communities seem to be abandoned. Universities themselves have become semi-detached from the communities they claim to serve whilst simultaneously failing to develop a curriculum that addresses key problems. These issues raise questions that test our humanity and our politics, and raise questions about the curriculum universities might offer to their students if we were to take a different starting point.

Critically engaged universities must address such questions as: What kind of communities are they intended for? How will their community of interest be defined? What kind of knowledge is appropriate for a different university? Jones, Rosing and Pink seek to provide useful answers to these and other relevant questions in terms of two large urban faith-based universities. A seeker choosing to search more widely may also stumble on John

Berger's insightful notion of a persistence of a 'longing for community' - which provides a necessary challenge to the market-led systems so that relationships in work, in social life, in communal life and in social labour can be the basis for university engagement. This is the building of social capital to meet the needs of communities.

CIVIC EXISTENCE

In fulfilling its role of building social capital, the civic existence of universities always needs to be stressed, yet there are differing and contentious forms of civic life, not always in agreement with each other. Bell argues forcefully that we need to reclaim and restate our public good role by generating our own powerful narratives of our future. Jackson asserts that these narratives need to inform the government of the day as well as the general public at every opportunity. Our relationship to government is problematical, as Davis points out, and is likely to remain so, which, given the existence of government-determined fee levels, means that partial deregulation and a quasi-market for fees is likely to be the emerging norm for some time into the future. How does this shape future opportunities and access to HE for Australians? How is it that in Germany, with a population of more than 80 million people, and other parts of Europe university tuition is a state obligation and the costs to the individual (domestic or international) are minimal?

As Bell points out, the idea of university engagement for the public good has been her standard mantra and prominent in the discourses surrounding higher education in recent years. However, the reality is that universities compete with one-another for places in a hierarchy of league tables.

Higher education is now part of the hyper-capitalistic growth of mass-production of goods and services involving mass-distribution and consumption through consumer networks. The university experience has become a commodity; it is largely monetised and it can be bought by those who have the funds. Of course, it is also more than this, and for many it is the best if not the only way to a fulfilling life and well-paid work where qualifications and learning bring justified rewards. It represents the high water mark for social democratic and meritocratic achievement; mass higher education is the signal for a more equal and fair society.

A 'MARKETISED' SYSTEM

The fundamental shape and characteristics of our HE system raises some important questions for engagement. Davis reflects on his decision to lend support for deregulation in the context of a constrained funding environment, reluctantly opting for a systemic change that was thwarted only by the fixer's inability to fix the Senate. Similarly, Holmes and Bell in their contributions to this edition are opening up a debate about the fundamental attributes and characteristics of our HE system, describing the fundamentally competitive character of our 'marketised' system of institutions. Yet the system itself is not a level playing field. The market has been and remains 'rigged' and unequal. The danger is that in accepting a form of dual or binary system of institutions (for example research-led AND teaching-intensive) we may be in danger of making losers as well as winners and enshrining the distinctions in the institutional structures and funding methodologies (this is the actual practice as it now exists even if in theory it is other than this). As long as we attempt to use a marketised rather than a co-operative model, we stand in danger of recreating precisely those forms of divisive and segregated institutions that George Orwell referred to as the 'graded snobberies of the English.' As George Holmes says, we want a race to the top not to the bottom. Left to itself, the best education possible for individuals harnesses the ambition of families for their children, but this ambition is limited by its nature and by the unequal access people have to material and cultural capitals. This is why the question of harnessing and

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capturing SOCIAL CAPITAL argued for by Bell and Firth in this edition is crucial for Engagement Australia. Under the present dispensation for some to succeed, others must fail. What Holmes is alluding to is the failure of those who do not get into the "right" universities or fail to study the "right" subjects, the result of which is an increase in inequality without a corresponding increase in quality at the top. The benefits for the few at the so-called elite universities are connected to the relative impoverishment of the greatly expanded "modern" universities. We must face up to strictures and ensure that the incentives for universities based on teaching are not themselves based on a zero-sum game whereby competition makes us all poorer as a result.

'BIG MAN CHARISMATA'

This issue of the Engagement journal suggests then in summary:

Significant players and persons are beginning to question the future role of universities - with engagement being at the heart of future models. Without such a development we are likely to get a university acting as a professional services company, which primarily serves its own needs rather than those of the public good.

There is a need to bring into public discussion what key stakeholders in HE actually want and need from their learning. The future of the critically engaged university is a BIG social issue for our time. If we thought we had determined this for all time, we were very wrong, as recent social changes have demonstrated.

The role of leadership should not be under-estimated (nor over-estimated). Davis' reflections do show the dangers of 'big