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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Problems Faced By Higher Education Institutions Because of the Constantly Changing Objectives, Sometimes Imposed Externally, Sometimes Self-Imposed

Frank McMahon

Abstract:

This paper reviews the extent to which the objectives that universities and other higher education institutions try to achieve are changing and, in particular, how a multiplicity of objectives has emerged. It traces the origin of the sources of pressure for change in objectives and concludes that industry, governments and pan-national organisations all contribute to the development of new objectives. The dependency of universities on external funding makes it impossible to refuse to accept objectives set by governments or other funding agencies. Both the multiplicity of the new objectives and their inconsistency cause difficulties for universities that attempt to achieve them. The paper argues that global trends in higher education are adding to the problems facing university leaders. A possible solution could be found in agreement on a value system that transcends changing objectives but such a value system is not yet in place.

Key words: university; objectives; industry influence; funding; value system.

1. Introduction

The role of senior management of all business organisations is to ensure that the organisation achieves the objectives set by the owners/shareholders. This task is simplified if there is but one objective, for example, maximum profit, but the era of multiple objectives has long since arrived. Thus, businesses now try to maximise profit but at the same time try to increase their share of the market, increase the capital value of their shares, behave in an environmentally friendly way, develop new products, etc. This paper addresses the problems which face the leaders of higher education as they strive to achieve objectives which are both multiple and changing.

It is often useful for the reader to know the background and likely prejudices of an author so I will describe myself as male, Irish and one who has worked for the past thirty-three years in higher education. It is I think pertinent to add that only six of those years were as a lecturer, three years as Head of Department and the remainder as Deputy Principal or

Principal/Director. The fact that my role has been primarily managerial has undoubtedly affected my viewpoint. Almost all my work has been in Ireland apart from three years in Zimbabwe and short-term projects in many countries.

There has been concern for some years about the growing complexity of the objectives which universities seek to achieve. Ron Barnett felt (about universities) that "with their competing missions of service, scholarship, military and commercial research, access and income generation, they have no single sense of direction."¹

If the generation of profit or the maximising of shareholder value provides managers of businesses with a focus for their efforts, there is no agreement on a single objective for universities. Smith and Webster have gone further than bemoaning the lack of an agreed objective and argued that modern universities are "so fractured and differentiated that it may have become absurd to seek to express any grand organizing principle."²

All the authors I have quoted above are British but others have expressed similar sentiments, for example the German author Teichler who wondered in 1999 if universities are in danger of becoming "bazaar" universities.³ And in 1996 I heard Frank Rhodes, former President of Cornell University, set out a litany of complaints made against United States' universities including:

- 1) neglect of undergraduate teaching by research universities in favour of inconsequential research
- 2) fragmented fields of study
- 3) garbled educational purposes
- 4) trivialised scholarship
- 5) improper accounting techniques
- 6) falsification of experimental results
- 7) conflicts of interest, etc.

He concluded that "universities are perceived as self-indulgent, arrogant and resistant to change".⁴

While noting that Rhodes was well ahead of his time in highlighting problems of improper accounting, I will concentrate on my main point: that the objectives of universities are now perceived as garbled, fractured and without a sense of direction. Since it has been commonly noted that universities are one of very few organisations that have survived for centuries in a recognisable format, it is surprising that a crisis of confidence should have developed in recent years. To analyse the source of this crisis, it is necessary to review briefly the traditional role of the university.

2. Role of the University

In the nineteenth century two opposing views of the role of the university were promulgated and influenced the future development of universities. John Henry Newman strongly advocated the teaching role of universities, with a strong emphasis on the benefits of a liberal education in a residential setting. In Germany, Wilhelm von Humboldt emphasised the role of the university in the creation of new knowledge, preferably scientific knowledge. José Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish educational philosopher writing in the 1930s articulated four missions for a university: The Teaching of Learned Professions, Scientific Research, Training for Political Leadership and Creation of Cultured Persons. The Robbins Commission which reported in the UK in 1963 arrived at similar conclusions when it defined four missions for higher education: Instruction in skills; promoting the general powers of the mind; the advancement of learning and the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.

A decade later the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education proposed five basic functions for American higher education, similar to the Robbins recommendations but introducing the new concept of the enlargement of educational justice for the post-secondary age group.⁵

Thus, in the century between Newman and the Carnegie Commission, the single role of the university -teaching- developed to encompass research and access. But what is more notable about these various definitions of the role of higher education is the absence of any mention of a role in relation to the national, regional or local economy. Neither is there any mention of income generation by universities.

3. Higher Education and the Economy

Whilst universities in the UK had enjoyed centuries of autonomy from government control, they came under increased scrutiny during and immediately after the Second World War. The war effort had thrown up shortages of skilled manpower and successive governments looked to the universities to solve these shortages. While universities were financially independent they could ignore requests to modify their in-take of students to satisfy some shortage. But the development of polytechnics and the move to mass education after the publication of the Robbins Report meant that higher education was increasingly dependent on government finance. Such financial aid weakened the independence of the universities (polytechnics never enjoyed the same level of independence), enabling the government to increase its demands on both universities and polytechnics. The introduction of aims related to the economy came via government pronouncements including "The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s" published in 1985. It opined that "The government believes that it

is vital for our higher education to contribute more effectively to the improvement of the economy" (paragraph 1.2) and, in an almost threatening manner, "The future health of higher education ... depends significantly on its own success in generating the qualified manpower the country needs" (paragraph 2.2). This and other government pronouncements altered the environment in which higher education worked in the UK, making it unsurprising that the major review of higher education undertaken by the Dearing Committee in the mid 1990s, should have a different view of the purpose of higher education.

4. Dearing Report

The Dearing Report (1997) defined the four main purposes of higher education as being:

- 1) "to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;
- 2) to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society;
- 3) to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels;
- 4) to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society."⁶

When these aims are compared with those outlined by Robbins, the major differences relate to the role of higher education in relation to the economy. Thus, research is no longer justified to merely increase the stock of knowledge but must also be applied to the benefit of the economy. And higher education must serve the needs of the economy at local regional and national levels. Those who lead HEIs must now grapple with reconciling the aims set out above, determining what priorities should prevail as between the development of the student and the demands of the economy.

5. Conflicting Aims

Traditionally, universities sought to serve the needs of their students above all other needs, other than an unswerving loyalty to truth. Even in a modern context, one can state this approach in a manner that eschews regional or national loyalties. It was well put by David Teather when he wrote that: "The primary commitment of a university with respect

to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge must be to the world, and not just to the community that gave it birth and supports it"⁷

But this approach ignores any local, regional or national targets set for the university by the government, quite likely the major provider of funds for the university. It would take a very brave Vice-chancellor to refuse to undertake regional or national initiatives because it was not in the interest of the world community. The loss of funding arising from a principled stand is likely to be unpopular outside the university and may well not withstand internal pressure. Individual faculties and schools within a university pursue sources of funding and are unlikely to appreciate giving up such funding for what some will regard as vague principles. If the pursuit of local and regional agendas is not appropriate for universities, was it appropriate for polytechnics or other institutions of higher education? And if yes, has the abolition of the binary divide in Australia, UK and other countries left a gap for an educational institution geared towards helping the development of the local economy?

There is a discernible trend towards questioning the economic agenda for universities. Roger Scruton's advice written in 2002 could well have been written by Newman:

Confine learning and teaching within a sacred precinct, shut it off from the world, so that it can move by its own inner force towards futile knowledge and you will produce the whole and healthy mind Relevance is the enemy of knowledge, and when universities make relevance their standard, they betray their mission"⁸

6. Changing Definition of a University

The nineteenth century debate about the role of a university seemed to be settled in favour of an institution that encompassed both teaching and research. In recent years it was argued that good teaching needed to be underpinned with research and therefore every self-respecting university had to be engaged in research. This conventional wisdom was under threat from two sources:

- (a) Since 1992 and the transformation of UK polytechnics into universities it has been recognised that some universities are much more actively engaged in research than others are. However, this could be attributed to a time factor related to the newness of university status and given time, all the new universities would develop their research activity.
- (b) Educational researchers found it impossible to prove that good research resulted in good teaching but often the benefit of the doubt was given, leading to a conclusion that research was an integral part of every university. A good example of this may be found in Barnett and Bjarnason:

It may just be that teaching in the context of research is more likely to produce the inquiring minds which advanced capitalism requires than teaching conducted without that environment.

This cosy consensus on the nature of a university was affronted by the decision of the UK government in June 2003 that universities need not do research. This decision was taken in the context of a decision to allow many teaching institutions to use the university title. There was a hostile reaction from the university community. For once, the vice-chancellors and their staff were united. The former were quoted as saying that breaking the link between teaching and research would devalue degrees and damage the international reputation of UK higher education, while the University teachers were also dismayed: "It makes a mockery of the very concept of a university".¹⁰

7. Industry and Pressure for Change

Whilst it is easy to identify the role of national governments, such as the UK government, in pushing for change, there were and remain other sources seeking change in the same direction. Industry has been a constant critic of practices in higher education, as evidenced by the submissions made to the Dearing Commission. The Institute of Directors expressed strong views to Dearing that "growth in participation seen over the last decade is not compatible with the maintenance of standards" (Dearing p. 37). This is an example of the "more means worse" argument.

The CBI was concerned that the:

Intellectual demands made on some students (most commonly those of the 1992 universities) may be inadequate and that others (most commonly those of the pre-1992 universities) may not have their generic skills adequately developed. The concerns about standards are greatest in the areas of engineering and science."¹¹

Sean Dorgan, CEO of the Industrial Development Authority of Ireland recently called for changes to higher education to advance sustainable competitive advantage and to create strong linkages to business. The address was seen by one commentator as reflecting "the impatience among many in the business community about what they see as the inward-looking nature of Irish education".¹²

In the UK the Chancellor has established the review of links between business and higher education by Richard Lambert, due to report in 2003. Lambert was quoted as saying that "there is a lot of collaboration going on - there has been a step change in the past ten years".¹³

Despite this step change, the Secretary of State for Education still felt that "You have too many employers who think that what is being taught in colleges and universities is not relevant to them".¹⁴

8. International Pressure for Change

European Ministers for Education signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999 setting a number of challenges for higher education in their respective countries including a two-cycle system: an undergraduate cycle of at least 3 years and second cycle leading to Masters/Doctorate. The fact that this system was designed to replace five-year degrees in many European countries, together with the insistence of Ministers that the first cycle award must have relevance in the labour market, leads to suspicions that the move was primarily economic in orientation.

This view is strengthened by the action of the EU in March 2000 in setting the strategic goal to make Europe by 2010 "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world". To respond to this challenge, the Heads of State and Government agreed some concrete common objectives of education and training systems in Europe, within the overarching principle of lifelong learning with a view to:

- 1) Improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU;
- 2) Facilitating the access of all to education and training systems;¹⁵
- 3) Opening up education and training systems to the wider world

The European Commission stated the need for excellence in its universities to underpin the knowledge society and achieve the target of Europe becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. It concluded that European universities are not at present globally competitive and that there were problems in a number of areas. These included the need to enable universities to contribute better to local and regional needs and strategies and the establishment of closer co-operation between universities and enterprises.¹⁶

The weight of supra-national bodies like the EU behind reform of education should not be under-estimated, not least because the EU has been a major provider of research funding in recent years. In addition, it exerts pressure on member states to join initiatives that are designed to improve the economy of Europe.

9. Inconsistent Demands for Change

In the earlier part of this paper I outlined the introduction of new challenges for higher education, principally to aid the economy, both regional and national, and to provide greater access to education. Insofar as these demands are consistently articulated, higher education institutions can gradually take them on board while seeking to safeguard traditional values. But these new demands are not always consistently articulated. A good example of inconsistency can be seen in the New Zealand situation. In the 1990s the government sought excellence by fostering competition between institutions and supported this approach with policies favouring student loans, user pays policies, encouraging international students, and devolution of governance and administration. More recently it has concluded that a new approach based on collaboration and co-ordination rather than competition is appropriate. The criteria of what counts as quality have been extended to embrace equality, citizenship, environmental sustainability and infrastructural provisions. Critical thinking is identified as a key attribute, as is creativity and problem solving and the humanistic ideals of equality, tolerance, care optimism and collaboration. Higher education institutions are expected to take the new policy on board, as the penalty for non-compliance is very clear: their funding will be under threat. "All providers that seek public funds... will be required to demonstrate both strategic capacity and alignment with national goals."¹⁷

Similarly in the UK, there has been a re-definition of priorities. In the White Paper published in 2003, Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills identified two areas where universities need to improve:

- 1) The expansion of higher education to be extended to the talented and best from all backgrounds
- 2) Need to make better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation ("turn ideas into successful businesses")¹⁸

He added one additional challenge: He wanted to make the system for supporting students fairer.

10. Changing Objectives Under Scrutiny

Most people connected with higher education would describe the movement from an elite to a mass system of higher education as the biggest change of the past thirty years. This move from participation by 10% of the age cohort in higher education to participation by 50% has obviously strained the capacity of managers in institutions to cope. But the problem for those who manage higher education is not just one of coping with a greater number of students. Rather, it embraces meeting the

multiplicity of tasks defined by Dearing for UK institutions and similar lists for other countries. Typically, these tasks include teaching an increasing number of undergraduate and postgraduate students, fostering research, promoting social cohesion, co-operating with industry for technology transfer, development of lifelong learning, assisting economic development at local, regional and national levels, raising finance, meeting quality standards and satisfying public accountability. Sir Howard Newby, Chief Executive of HEFCE, felt that the biggest change came from, "the realisation and articulation of the central role of higher education in creating and supporting a modern economy and benefiting society in a wide variety of ways"¹⁹

While the move towards greater participation in higher education is largely welcomed by most academics, there are fears that the quality of education is suffering. There is simply not enough time to devote to individual students now as there was when class sizes were much smaller. Research into teaching strategies is now addressing ways of overcoming the inherent difficulties associated with growth in numbers.

A second and less obvious problem concerns the control of the curriculum that supports lifelong learning. Richard Pring, Oxford Professor of Education, speaking to the Irish Educational Studies Conference, warned of the danger of the learning society being geared to the goals of economic improvement. Since this agenda is controlled by a relatively small clique with power over qualifications and curriculum, "there is a danger that such a society will work with an impoverished notion of learning."²⁰

Other commentators have noted some of the things that have not featured in recent changes in higher education. For example, Barnett *et al* (2001) noted that the undergraduate curriculum has commanded rather less attention than might be expected. Equally, major issues such as being part of the conscience of a democratic system (Dearing) do not figure in the urgings of Western universities. Stephen Rowland found that South African academics strove to create a multicultural society while for British academics the issue was more about the threat caused by market ideology to the social values of co-operation, care and critique.²¹ Concern about market ideology also influenced David Preston's exploration of the growth of managerialism, claiming that it is inherently flawed as it is based on achieving the objectives of stakeholders but has no way of quantifying what individual stakes should be. Managerialism has led to the adoption of "the ethic of effectiveness" in which the market is the only judge of whether something is worthwhile and markets are obsessed with measurement of quantity and quality. The need for such measurement has led to a pre-occupation with documentation, auditing and bureaucracy.²²

It may be true that when one looks back, former times are seen through rose-tinted glasses, leading us to decry what has been lost. This can be illustrated by recounting the story of the Chancellor of the University of Paris who is quoted as "regretting that in the old days... lectures were more frequent... but now the time taken for lectures is being spent in meetings and discussions". The sentiment is surely familiar but the fact that it was said almost 800 years ago, in 1213, may be surprising.²³

11. Effects of Changing Objectives

Constantly changing objectives, coupled with financial dependency on government finance, has undermined the confidence of managers in higher education. They feel it is necessary to pursue possibilities of extra finance even when it would be better not to do so. Since much of this extra finance comes on a marginal cost basis (rather than full cost) it does not solve the financial dependency of the institution and may even worsen it. Apart from the financial aspect, the pursuit of too many initiatives weakens the focus of the institution and makes the task of managing even more difficult. The extent to which UK universities feel the pressure to earn funding was borne upon me when I recently had luncheon with the vice-chancellor of a British University. He dismissed Foundation Degrees as "rubbish" but followed this by an assertion that if the government provided the money, he would introduce such degrees immediately.

The chief executive of HCFCE sees it as one of the challenges facing his council to change the financial arrangements in a way that discourages the chasing of inappropriate funding.

Why don't universities currently concentrate on their areas of strength? One answer is that they do but the current funding arrangements may not encourage them to do so sufficiently. A key issue for the Council is how far we can re-engineer our funding model to encourage rather than discourage a greater diversity of mission within the sector.²⁴

12. Quantifying the Challenge

In this era of benchmarking, we frequently look to the performance of other countries to determine what objectives we should set for ourselves. Ministers for Education often adopt this approach, seeking to identify best practice to guide their own efforts. In this regard, the OECD has been a source of statistical analysis and reports that are very useful to policy makers. I have extracted two tables from Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators, 2002 to illustrate this point. Table 1 shows the

educational attainments of the population in age group 25 – 64 years of nine selected countries and the mean for thirty OECD states. Even a cursory glance will reveal major differences in the attainment level of males and females in several countries, prompting the policy maker to ask why and what can be done to redress the situation. Similarly, there are major differences between countries. For example, the attainment of tertiary education is higher in the United States than in any other country and the setting of that level of attainment would be a formidable challenge for many countries.

Table 1: Percentage Educational Attainment of Population, 2001 in age group 25-64 years, by gender

	Secondary	Secondary	Tertiary	Tertiary
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Australia	66	52	27	31
Belgium	59	58	27	28
Denmark	82	79	24	29
France	67	61	27	24
Germany	87	78	28	18
Ireland	55	60	35	36
Japan	83	83	36	32
UK	60	57	27	25
USA	87	88	37	37
Mean 30 Countries	66	62	24	22

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance OECD Indicators 2002, Paris. (p. 55)

Table 2 sets out the same data as Table 1 but relates to a narrower segment of the population, age group 25 – 34 years. Because this is a younger age group and one that has benefited from the increased educational opportunities of recent years, one would expect better attainment levels than for the 25 – 64 years age group. This is borne out by the statistics as most countries show a notable improvement in attainment levels. For example, Ireland has surpassed the USA in tertiary level attainment by females, while Japan has achieved the highest completion rate for secondary education.

Table 2: Percentage Educational Attainment of Population, 2001 in age group 25-34 years, by gender

	Secondary	Secondary	Tertiary	Tertiary
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Australia	73	68	29	38
Belgium	74	77	33	39
Denmark	85	88	25	34
France	78	78	32	37
Germany	87	84	23	20
Ireland	71	76	45	50
Japan	92	95	46	49
UK	70	65	30	29
USA	87	89	36	42
Mean 30				
Countries	73	74	26	29

Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance OECD Indicators 2002*, Paris. (p. 55)

13. Some Conclusions

Higher education is in a state of flux as it grapples with the problem of attempting to cope with constantly changing objectives. This problem, difficult in itself, is made worse by the fact that most higher education institutions are heavily dependent on governments for their financial survival. This forces them to do the bidding of their paymasters and to undertake activities that are not in their long-term interest, but which satisfy short-term demands of the government.

As an example of the problem caused by the lack of an agreed mission, one can consider the attitude of universities to improving access to universities by students from groups hitherto under-represented. Governments have in recent years urged universities to take more students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Such students may be academically weaker than middle class students from affluent backgrounds, and thus their introduction may have an adverse effect on academic standards achieved. Alternatively, it may be possible to bring disadvantaged students up to the same standards as 'traditional' students but it may require extra resources to do so (more tutorial support, provision of textbooks and a computer, etc.). Thus, the issue of access involves objectives in regard to quality and finance. The absence of agreed objectives makes it impossible to solve this problem, other than by some compromise that may leave no party happy.

We sometimes look to globalisation as a force that may solve some of the world's problems by, for example, increasing the income of

individuals and nations. But in the case of higher education, I fear that globalisation may have the effect of worsening the situation rather than improving it. The availability of qualifications through the Internet may place intolerable pressure on traditional providers of education to match the low cost of Internet providers. Since traditional providers do not have the benefit of the economies of scale of Internet providers, they will be faced with unenviable choices of lowering costs (and quality) or pricing themselves out of existence. The current debate on education as a traded commodity and the pressure by large trans-national suppliers (mainly American) to force small countries to remove their barriers to access by global players does not augur well for the future.

A central theme of this paper has been the need for the establishment of a value system, which transcends changing objectives. Such a value system would allow judgements to be made between competing objectives. But in a different context Preston has argued that there cannot be a single consensus view of knowledge.²⁵ In the more limited field of values that may underpin actions in higher education, I believe consensus can be achieved based on the pre-eminence of the student's welfare. It is important that such agreement is reached and implemented, both nationally and internationally, to avoid continuing unsatisfactory compromises.

Notes

¹ Ronald Barnett, *The Idea of Higher Education*, (Buckingham: SRHE/Open University, 1990).

² Anthony Smith and Frank Webster, *The Postmodern University?* (Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University, 1997).

³ Ulrich Teichler, "Lifelong Learning as challenge for higher education: the state of knowledge and future research tasks," *Higher Education Management*, 11 (1999) 37-53.

⁴ Frank Rhodes, "The University: National Powerhouse or Endangered Species?" *The Irish Times* Lecture, Dublin, 24 September 1996.

⁵ Carnegie Commission of Higher Education, *The Purposes and Performance of Higher Education in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

⁶ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society (Dearing Report)* (London: HMSO, 1997).

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¹⁰ John Clare, "Universities need not do research," *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2003, p. 1.

¹¹ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, p. 37.

¹² Sean Flynn, "Time to rethink Irish education, warns IDA chief," *Irish Times*, 3 March 2003, p. 8.

¹³ In an interview in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 13 June 2003.

¹⁴ Tony Tysome, "Business will pay if courses meet needs," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 28 March 2003, p. 56.

¹⁵ Commission of the European Communities, *European Benchmarks in Education and Training: follow-up to the Lisbon European Council* (Brussels: European Commission, 2002).

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¹⁸ Dept. of Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education* (London: Stationery Office, 2003).

¹⁹ Harold Newby, "The Management of Change in Higher Education," *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 15 (2003): 9-22.

²⁰ Richard Pring, "A Learning Society, a cautionary note - Presidential Address 1997 Annual Conference," *Irish Educational Studies*, 17(1998): 1-16.

²¹ Rowland, Stephen, "Teaching for Democracy," *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(2003): 89 - 101.

²² David Preston, "Managerialism and the Post-Enlightenment Crisis of the British University," in *The University of Crisis*, ed. David Preston (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).

²³ Graeme Moodie and Rowland Eustace, *Power and Authority in British Universities* (London: Unwin, 1974).

²⁴ Harold Newby, "The Management of Change in Higher Education," *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 15(2003): 9-22.

²⁵ Preston, p. 63.

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