

What does the public think of all this?

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At what was an excellent conference I was asked to talk about ‘What does the public think of all this?’ Mind you, I was until recently, and still am from time to time, one of those trusted by only 19% of the public (as mentioned by Brian Heap in Chapter 1), the lowest of the low, a journalist.

However, there may be a lesson in declining rates of trust from media for academia too. I predict that with greater reliance on the market, academia will inevitably see a fall in its current high rating of 80% trust in professors. Anyway, I’m not going to suggest how to improve the PR on this topic. After all, even ‘19%’ journalists have some standards. (I did say ‘some’?)

But, to answer the question of ‘What does the public think of all this?’, unfortunately, the public — or, at least, the vast majority of the public — thinks very little about all this. The public, after all, are assailed by market pressures in their own lives and consequently, have their own fish to fry.

I further believe they think little about it because they have become ‘normalized’ (‘adjusted’ or ‘accustomed’) to the business model coming in a ‘one size fits all’ guise. It’s not just universities, though the drive is acute there, but practically everything that could be expected to generate a profit is now being subjected to the business model. It is a world view. It’s called capitalism and, of course, it has good and bad aspects to it. All systems do. It’s no surprise that it’s huge on the agenda now since the fall of communism in 1989.

The situation in the health service, because it produces cases of life and death — and the media, for instance, loves such sensation simply because it sells — is probably even more acute than that in education; but an education system, I believe, can eat away far more at a society’s values. This may or may not produce good results, as every society has some values that are better off eaten away, but history, I believe, teaches us to proceed carefully.

Much of the problem seems to me that the business model overrates ‘mass producers’ (publish or perish) and underrates perfectionists. If that is the way we wish universities to develop, personally, I believe we’re all in trouble. There is an obsessive desire to measure everything now. I used to work in America — in Boston University — and when I first went there, an English professor (i.e. a professor from England, rather than a professor of English) said to me that everything in America works on numbers. He wasn’t joking: such and such a wide receiver ran 8354 yards this season; my grade point average is 3.93 or 3.25 or 2.46 and my sales are up by 23.56% so I’m in for a promotion. Even the illegal numbers game in the U.S.A. is based on random numbers, often from the closing digits of the New York Stock Exchange.

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Such an obsession with measurability — a ‘never mind the quality, feel the width’ compulsion — has now become the case in Ireland and Britain. These countries have largely adopted the American model of privatization. Preferment in universities now often depends on the amount of money you can bring to the institution. Lecturers and professors become made into salesmen.

People used to wonder about American politics, about why Washington politics, in particular, was so right-wing. After all, both Democrats and Republicans supported the ‘free market’. There didn’t seem to be enough difference between them; there isn’t. Greater balance is needed.

But those of us who read both right-wing and left-wing thought on these matters — the impossible balance between individuality and communality or between competition and co-operation — come from a different time. Basically, what I’m saying is the following: if you colonize culture, you colonize minds. I’m afraid that privatization has colonized too much of university culture and minds already.

It’s regularly presented now as though there are no alternatives. The market must be supreme and to oppose it is frequently derided and is to question reality itself. In some circles, such questioning is heretical. When I say that to colonize culture is to colonize minds, I mean that anybody who questions the market — the rush towards privatization — can be accused of adopting a ‘wrong’ or a ‘dis-proven’ system of thought.

Michel Foucault, who spent from 1954 to 1958 at Uppsala University (the university of Lars Engwall) in beautiful Sweden, described himself in his inaugural lecture to the College de France in December 1970 as “an expert in the history of systems of thought”.

Humanity, throughout history, has gone through many systems of thought; they often form its *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age). In about the last half-millennium, we’ve had: Pre-Copernican thought (in which the sun revolved around the Earth); before that and still vibrant, a Christian system of thought; there has been a Marxist system of thought; Freudian, Jungian and Adlerian systems of thought; existentialism was a system of thought considered appropriate after Auschwitz... and now we’ve reached a system of thought which ordains that the market must be supreme.

But all it is, I will argue, is a system of thought with ‘good’ consequences (for a few) and ‘bad’ consequences for many. It is, by definition, anti-democratic and anti-utilitarian. ‘Utilitarianism’, conceived by Jeremy Bentham and furthered by the British classical liberal thinker of the 19th Century, John Stuart Mill, is based on the notion of the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’. The market always seeks to undermine that.

It seems to me now that we face a system of thought that is pervasive, perhaps beneficial to some individuals, such as share-holders (i.e. in the short-term, but only in the short-term), and overwhelming. Certainly, in newly wealthy Ireland, the PR push behind such a system of thought is phenomenal. In that sense, the media, mostly owned by private corporations, may prefigure the way that academia is likely to go.

Yet it is only a system of thought that decrees that universities should be run on the same lines as a business. It’s actually insulting really, because it undoes

generations of university practices. Most people who enter academic life (not all, but most) do so after quite intense study. They generally eschew greater wages in industry for the sake of greater autonomy and inventiveness in their discipline. Nobody is totally autonomous, of course, but pro-business advocates now want to take what's left away. They seek profit. Along with a top-down, hierarchical approach (outmoded even in the business world it seeks to emulate) and the idea of education as merely another industry with quantifiable measurements and the proliferation of meaningless administrative work, universities have become dulled.

I can remember an organized debate in my own university — DCU (Dublin City University) — between its President, Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, and Professor Helena Sheehan. Naturally, von Prondzynski was on the side of the business model and Sheehan opposed him. After it was all over, there was a show of hands to determine who had won the debate. At least 90% of perhaps 200 people present sided with Dr Sheehan. She had won handsomely, practically thoroughly. But really it was a hollow victory. Despite her arguments and the fact that at least 90% of the audience agreed with them, von Prondzynski simply carried on as before, implementing a business model in as many areas of the university as he could.

It reminded me that polls showed that 80% (more, in some cases) of the populations of England, Italy and Spain had voiced against invading Iraq. Nonetheless, the invasion went ahead anyway. That's great democracy — the ideology for export to Iraq. We live, I'm afraid, in a 'bullying' age. When 10 or at most 20% of people can determine the course of events, it's certainly not democracy. It's bullying.

That's the wider picture into which I believe the trouble with universities is set. Some people believe that capitalism inevitably leads to fascism or some other authoritarian political ideology. I don't, but I am cognisant of the dangers. Making a profit — the legitimate aim of business — is very different from 'uni-versitas', the 'one truth' from which universities take their name. Time was when universities, at least theoretically, formed a community of teachers and scholars. The freshest freshman (or 'freshperson') was considered, albeit theoretically, the equivalent of the most honoured professor in the place.

Now, with university heads likening themselves to the CEOs of corporations, even such a theoretical basis for the existence of universities has been undermined. It's all top-down now (really democratic, that!). It's a vertical structure with pay to match at the higher levels, rather than a notionally horizontal one.

I know of one university in Ireland where the president travels around in a helicopter. Presumably he believes he's the chief executive of Coca-Cola or Microsoft or BP or some other such entity. But he's not. He is the president of an Irish university — not as well remunerated as the chief executive of a multinational company — but a man with a different, arguably a more difficult job to do. Yet he cites measuring outputs from such 'idiotic' (and I mean idiotic) sources as the Shanghai Jiao Tong University and *The Times* of London rankings. However, the Shanghai Jiao Tong University is a technological university, which means that it excludes all books from its rankings and only published articles are included. Its criteria include 10% for Nobel Laureates among graduates. Only five subjects are used: chemistry, physics, medicine, economics and maths (Fields Medals). You

could be the next Shakespeare or Joyce or Yeats and you don't count. There's 20% for Nobel Laureates among current staff in the above five areas. There's a further 20% for articles published in two science journals — *Nature* and *Science*.

There's another 20% for highly cited researchers in 21 areas (those wildly overrated 'mass producers'). All 21 subject areas, bar one and part of another, are in science and technology. There's 20% also for articles in the Science Citation Index Expanded and the Social Science Index...despite the fact that many prestigious journals in the social sciences are not listed. Finally, there's 10% for overall academic performance. That's 100%.

The *Times Higher Education Supplement* ranking is equally absurd. It includes 40% based on a 'peer review' exercise. So, last year, they contacted 3703 academics around the world and asked them to name the top 30 universities in their fields. No mention of sampling, representativeness or of how findings were counted and weighed are included.

That's why I say these rankings of universities are 'idiotic'. It is a most non-academic word, but it seems to me to be the truth. It's like trying to drink milk with a fork. There really is no point — it's all PR. What of the traditional Irish or British university, where there's roughly equal numbers engaged in humanities as in sciences? Clearly, humanities disciplines are undervalued. Maybe that's okay. The 'Two Cultures' of C.P. Snow haven't really been bridged, even though it's almost 50 years since Snow delivered *that* lecture in Cambridge.

Maybe people engaged in the sciences believe that their colleagues in humanities deserve no better. It is an argument — not one that I agree with — because humanities are non-axiomatic. I was once going to go to Trinity College Dublin to study Natural Science back in 1972. I had a place but was working at the time and I hoped the company would pay my fees to do the degree. It didn't happen because the union intervened and I was let go. Had it happened and in the unlikely event that I had been able to succeed as spectacularly as most of the delegates at this symposium, I would almost certainly have inherited the system of thought associated with physics or chemistry in the 1970s.

Again, Foucault (he seems to dog me in this piece) addressed the question. He decided that what really mattered was not what one did, as what the doing of it did — especially over a long time — to the person involved. In that regard, I must mention Professor Hans Wigzell, whose presentation preceded mine, who told us that the area of the brain dealing with navigation is extra-developed in London cabbies. It would appear that Foucault was correct in his assertion. Role has an effect on personality.

In other words, it would be possible for me to hold views directly polarized from those I now hold. At present, I acknowledge that the market may be beneficial for some but not for most. After all, its ultimate resolution is that one person owns everything.

I am concerned that the increasingly hierarchical structure within universities is alienating students and some staff (mostly junior ones). There was a time when universities were at an angle to society. Now they are increasingly being bent to the same angle as society. Put simply: "Look, you've got to realize that education is now an industry", Professor Colm Kearney of Trinity College Dublin said to me recently.

William Butler Yeats, however, held that “education should be the start of a fire”. It’s true it wouldn’t blaze with equal intensity in everyone...but an industry...a mere, mundane, prosaic industry...I just don’t know about that. When education, real education, becomes only an industry, it’s probably time to think of it as dead.

The media is often considered an industry. Hence the drive to satisfy people’s natural prurience; hence the sensationalising, decontextualising, even ‘making it up’. Hence the truth of Brian Heap’s 19%; in fact, 19% is generous. People are unfortunately right not to trust most media. They’re in it for the profit.

I foresee the same thing happening — despite elaborate checks and balances — to academia. We are all human, after all. Money is not in itself evil, but it is at the root of all evil; it is power. The further the application of the business model goes I would certainly expect to see university professors fall from their 80% trustworthy rating. That might be unfair, but as soon as research ceases to be ‘disinterested’, there will be an automatic human response as to what the paymaster might be getting out of all this.

I was invited to participate in a conference organized by the Irish trade union SIPTU at UCD (University College Dublin) - the largest university in Ireland. The theme of the conference was ‘UCD — University of Corporation?’ I went along, as did some others, including a senior politician from Ireland’s Labour Party. What we found there was fear.

Despite being the largest university in Ireland, with approx. 20 000 students, the people who turned up — a few hundred — fitted into a single lecture hall. Most of the contract staff, hoping for a position and tenure, were afraid to be seen at such a meeting. A number of them said so afterwards. That is the human price of the business model.

Anyway, I mention the senior politician from Ireland’s Labour Party because, after I had said my piece and sat down beside her, she said to me, laughing: “You shouldn’t have told them the truth. You’ll never make a politician.” Politics is, I fear, at the root of it all. Of course, there is always a desirable balance between competition and co-operation. At various times, one will dominate, but it seems to me — at least on the evidence of American society — that advocates of more and more competition are either self-interested or deluded.

I will finish on this point. I have often thought that professional politicians must be laughing up their sleeves at how easily they have been able to convince university presidents and provosts to adopt the business model. There is an even nastier side to all this though: it could be that training has replaced education because education worked. I’m afraid I believe that presidents and provosts might be involved in self-sabotage — generally unwitting self-sabotage — but the result could be the same. We’ll see!