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TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENTS AS KEY STAKEHOLDERS

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Transforming higher education

At a recent international conference an eminent keynote speaker on ‘Higher Education in the Market Place’ made the tentative suggestion that students, even 18-year old non-fee paying students, should be taken seriously as stakeholders.

I was appalled. I wasn’t appalled so much by the rider he attached that full-time students should pay full-cost fees, and thereby earn the right to be taken seriously, rather, I was appalled that he did not already consider students (fee-paying or not) as a major stakeholder — indeed, as *the* major stakeholder in higher education.

It is students that makes higher education unique. Higher education is first and foremost about the enhancement and empowerment of students as participants in a process of learning. Even more than that, higher education is about participation in a process of learning for *transformation*. I shall return to this.

Of course, research and scholarship, training, social criticism and community relationships are all important aspects of the multi-dimensional mission of universities. They are all components of the mix that is unique to universities; that provides the context in which higher-level intellectual development can be nurtured. However, all these other aspects can, and are, carried out by institutions other than universities. Teaching and learning is the core business of higher education. If higher education is to be the transformative process that I shall suggest it must be, then addressing students as the central stakeholder, I will argue, is fundamental for future of the university.

We have long since passed the point where we merely pay lip-service to student concerns. Higher education is going through a paradigm shift, the élite master-apprenticeship system of initiation into the mysteries, effective for many centuries is now a ludicrous anachronism. Yet it is still practised. There are many for whom the university is still a cloister, disengaged from, and unresponsive to, the wider society. There are those who continue to endorse John Buchan’s assertion that ‘to live for a time close to great minds is the best kind of education’.

I would not want to imply that higher education should have its mission, purposes and goals determined by the needs of society much less the short-term economic requirements of politicians or employers. I do not find myself greatly enamoured of John Naisbitt’s view that: ‘in an information society, education is no mere amenity; it is the prime tool for growing people and profits’. Education is rather too commodified in this view, for my taste. It treats education as the manure in which people are passively planted.

None the less, higher education must, I suggest, be responsive to socio-economic developments. More than that, it must be pro-active in these developments. It is to this interrelationship between academia and society that I wish to turn, but, in so doing, address it through the agency of the student.

The world, as we are constantly being told, is changing rapidly (UNESCO, 1995). Higher education has a key role in providing the change agents for the future. Higher education should provide a transformative experience for students, so that they can, themselves, take a leading role in transforming society. This leads me back to the intended double-meaning in my title: higher education must, I contend, itself be transformed if it is to be successful as a transformative process (Harvey and Knight, 1996).

Let me suggest some ways in which higher education might be transformed.

- Shift from teaching to learning.
- Develop explicit skills, attitudes, and abilities as well as knowledge.
- Develop appropriate assessment procedures.
- Reward transformative teaching.
- Encourage discussion of pedagogy.
- Provide transformative learning for academics.
- Foster new collegiality.
- Link quality improvement to learning.
- Audit improvement.

I will deal with each of these in turn, some very much more briefly than others, merely pointing to the sort of transformation that might take place.

From teaching to learning

The key to that transformation is to reconceptualise the learning process. To move the emphasis from teaching to learning in higher education. To see students as participants in a process — participants to be enhanced and empowered:

- enhanced through the provision of an educational experience that enables the development, and continued improvement, of the knowledge, abilities and skills of students;
- empowered not just to select their own curriculum, nor to monitor the quality of the service they are provided, nor even to construct their own learning contracts — as valuable as all these things are — but empowered as critical, transformative learners.

Rather than the learner as a passive recipient as inferred in Naisbitt's 'manure view', I prefer a view that emphasises the active nature of learning. As Ralph Waldo Emerson adroitly put it: 'what school, college or lectures bring to people depends on what people bring to carry it home in'.

Crucial for transformative higher education is empowerment through the development of students' critical ability, that is, their ability to *think and act in a way that transcends taken-for-granted preconceptions, prejudices and frames of reference*. (Critical thinking is not to be confused with 'criticism', especially the common-sense notion of negative criticism.)

Developing critical ability is about students having the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than submitting packaged chunks to an assessor who will tell them if it sufficient or 'correct'. An approach that encourages critical ability treats students as *intellectual performers* rather than as compliant audience. An approach that encourages critical ability transforms teaching and learning into an active process of coming to understand. It attempts to empower students not just as 'customers' in the education process but for life (Harvey and Burrows, 1992).

What does this involve in practice in our universities? Well, it requires, as a starting point, consideration of students as principal stakeholders. It means moving way beyond the mooted possibility of the eminent speaker I mentioned at the start of my talk. It sees empowerment of students as fundamental to the future development of mass higher education.

Transformation is not just about adding to a student's stock of knowledge or set of skills and abilities. At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context.

Developing graduate attributes

Higher education develops a variety of attributes in students apart from providing them with a body of academic knowledge. However, there are four problems with the way we operate in HE:

- non-knowledge-based attributes are rarely made explicit — graduates often do not know how good they are;
- subject knowledge is over-emphasised, to the point that once final examinations are over students often think they have finished learning, rather than just started learning for life;
- students have to develop non-knowledge-based attributes for themselves, academics are often not good at teaching or facilitating the learning of such attributes;
- when knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes are explicitly addressed within higher education they are often viewed in isolation (a reductionist model), seen as add-ons, and things that can be acquired (through a single training event) rather than continuously developed.

I shall, for illustrative purposes, develop a horticultural analogy in which I will frame collections of graduate attributes as flowers. The analogy deliberately frames graduate attributes concretely rather than providing a list of abstract concepts. More to the point, the analogy enables an holistic picture rather than a reductionist fragmentation (Figures 1 and 2).

This analogy enables us to see graduate attributes in terms of an integrated set that identifies the ability of graduates to *do* something. This is not simply pandering to employer-dominated perspectives of higher education — after all, not all practical outputs of higher education are employer fodder. It is, surely, our central aim to produce graduates with the ‘higher-level academic skills of analysis, critique, synthesis, creativity, and so on.

Conversely, it is a mistake to think that employers want higher education graduates *trained* for their benefit. On the contrary, if they merely want trained personnel they can get them a lot cheaper than by employing graduates. Employers want graduates who are going to take a risk, who are bright and challenging, who can not only deal with change but can lead change.

The ideal candidate would probably have a 2:1 from an absolutely cracking university who is the leader in their field. In addition they will probably have more than two languages, they will probably be captain of rugby or chairman of, say, the Rag Committee, and they will have run a Student Helpline. And, I mean, its just terrifying, there *are* people like this around. They will have taken a gap year probably between school and university and they will backpack around South America or Asia.

If you say to them, tell us about your year in South America and they say, “well Daddy bought me the flight and Daddy did this”, then generally we are not interested, generally we are much more interested in the person who says: “Oh I flogged my guts out washing cars for six months and got an elastic band airline to Rio and then bussed to Peru”, then we are much more interested in that self-reliant, determined, focused person. (Harvey, et al., 1996)

However, to continue the analogy, it is a mistake to equate the graduate with the flower. On the contrary, the graduate is the *horticulturist*: growing, nurturing and perfecting a variety of flowers. These flowers are attributes for life, and the lifelong learner is the lifelong gardener. It is important to empower the student — the learner — to cultivate the flowers, to select and present an appropriate bouquet for any circumstance.

We, in universities, must move away from prescribing the exact nature of the perfect. highly cultivated, *knowledge* variety and instead provide the fertile ground to enable a proliferation of species and new variants.

There are many ‘florists’, graduate recruiters amongst them, looking for exciting and varied bouquets. The single red rose of knowledge has its moment, but there is a rapidly diminishing demand for it in a rapidly changing world, where knowledge has a short shelf-life, and where the world is no longer head-over-heels in love with

higher education. I will pursue the analogy no further at this point, lest my flowers wilt.

If higher education is to play an effective role in education for the 21st century then it must focus its attention on the transformative process of learning. A prime goal should be to transform learners so that they are able to take initiative, work with independence, to choose appropriate frameworks of reference, while being able to see the limitations of those frameworks and to stand outside them when necessary.

To be an effective transformative process, higher education must itself be transformed so that it produces transformative agents: critical reflective learners able to cope with a rapidly changing world.

Appropriate assessment of students

Assessment of students is a powerful tool in developing learning strategies, if, for example, assessments can be expedited through the adoption of surface techniques (e.g., memorising facts) then the learning is likely to be superficial, lacking a depth of understanding (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Brown and Knight, 1995).

Higher education, I suggest, needs to develop assessment procedures that encourage transformative learning and facilitate the empowerment of the learner. A ‘quality’ assessment system might include the following features:

- clear curriculum aims;
- transparent expectations of outcomes understood by staff and students;
- assessment of a range of integrated learning outcomes;
- assessment methods should be valid measures of the intended learning outcomes;
- multiple assessment methods to assess multiple aims;
- students must get *useful* feedback on their work;
- assessment data should inform the processes of continuous quality improvement of learning.

Rewarding transformative teaching

I would like to see a lot more effort go to encouraging and rewarding transformative teaching — that is, teaching that is planned to bring about learning. Such teaching is a significant element in promoting transformative higher education. Far too often the situation is that reward is inversely related to the amount of time spent teaching:

The average faculty salary ranged from a low of \$34,307 for those who spent more than 70 percent of their time on teaching to a high of \$56,181 for

faculty who spent less than 35 percent of their time on teaching. (Ratcliff and associates, 1995, p. iv)

Some institutions are taking teaching seriously in promotion to professorship but those that require explicit, high-level teaching competence are rare. One such is the University of Otago (1995), where the promotion criteria for applicants for professorship are that candidates should demonstrate at least high level competence, and preferably outstanding leadership in teaching, assessment and curriculum development.

However, it is not just establishing a process of rewarding ‘good’ teaching. On the contrary, as I have argued, there is a need to reward good learning facilitation. A key element of this relates to the feedback given to students for assessed work. As students invest considerable effort in assessed work, transformative teaching would, among other things, provide meaningful and varied assessment tasks, clear criteria against which assessments are made and *useful* feedback to students on assessed work.

Transformative learning for academics.

University academics are rarely trained teachers. In the main they learn ‘on the job’. As such they tend to perpetuate traditional methods: not least lecturing with an emphasis on subject content. They are often ill-equipped to facilitate learning and usually have had no help in developing students skills and abilities beyond those required to assimilate and reproduce knowledge.

It is time we took a professional approach towards the development of academics as facilitators of a range of skills and abilities as well as knowledge. We need to provide professional development that contains the possibility of *transformative learning for academics* — that, among other things, encourages a shift from teaching to learning.

However, it is crucial, that professional development is projected as positive and enhancing in response to new challenges, rather than as negative and remedial — a reaction to old failings!

Discuss pedagogy

It is important that pedagogy is a subject that is openly discussed, debated and developed. It is important, for a transformative higher education, that culture conducive to open discussion of pedagogic processes is encouraged. It is important to overcome the dominant view that sees teaching as a private affair between consenting adults — a member of staff and his or her students.

There are various ways of encouraging such a process, not least by developing a general culture of quality improvement. Management can facilitate this by :

- setting the parameters within which the quality improvement process takes place;
- establishing a non-exploitative, suspicion-free context in which a culture of quality improvement and pedagogic innovation can flourish;

- establishing and ensuring a process of continuous improvement;
- disseminating good practice through an effective and open system of communication;
- encouraging and facilitating team working amongst academic and academic-related colleagues;
- delegating responsibility for quality improvement and pedagogic innovation to staff and students.

Foster new collegiality.

In taking these steps higher education management can also foster a climate of *new collegiality*. It is, I would argue, a mistake to adopt the consumerist rhetoric in relation to higher education. Higher education is not a product or service to be purchased. It is a process in which people participate. A crucial element of that process is engagement and dialogue, an exchange of knowledge, views and experiences. In short, higher education is at heart a collegial process.

However, universities can no longer retreat into an autonomous collegialism: a revived cloisterism. They must balance autonomy with the political requirements of accountability and a renewed sense of responsibility to stakeholders, not least students.

At the risk of developing a false dichotomy, allow me to briefly characterise cloisterism and new collegialism (Harvey, 1995).

Cloisterism places primary emphasis on academic autonomy. It emphasises the absolute right of the collegial group to make decisions relating to academic matters, regards the integrity of members as inviolable (except where exceptionally challenged from within), and considers the role of the group as that of developing and defending its specialist realm, which is usually discipline-based.

Cloisterism tends to be staff-directed, producer-oriented and research-dominated. It relates to the internal concerns of the group and sees students as novices to be initiated into the mysteries of the discipline. It is effectively inward-looking. The knowledge it possesses is revealed incrementally and according to the dictates of the self-appointed 'owners'. The skills and abilities it expects students to develop are often implicit and obscure. Sometimes what is expected of students is deliberately opaque and shrouded in mystifying discourse.

New collegialism, although sceptical of managerialism, has an outward-looking approach. It sees the collegial group as the forum for academic decision-making but is prepared to enlarge that group to allow discourse and negotiation with significant others, not least students. It emphasises accountable professional expertise rather than the inviolable academic integrity. It perceives its role as one of widely disseminating knowledge and understanding through whatever learning-facilitation and knowledge-production processes are most effective (Knight, 1994).

New collegialism is responsive to changing circumstances and requirements. It is learning-oriented. It focuses on facilitating student learning rather than teaching, and explicitly encourages the development of a range of skills and abilities. It prefers transparency to obfuscation. It values team work.

Of course, these characterisations are rarely so clear-cut nor evident in practice. They represent two ends of a continuum, and are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of cloisterism and new collegialism

| <i>Cloisterism</i> | <i>New collegialism</i> |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Secretive | Open |
| Isolationist | Networking |
| Individual | Team work |
| Defensive | Responsive |
| Traditional approach | Innovative |
| Producer-oriented | Participant-oriented |
| Clings to power | Empowering |
| Wary of change | Welcomes change |
| Elitist | Open access |
| Implicit quality criteria | Explicit quality criteria |
| Information provider | Facilitates active learning |

Link quality improvement to learning

At a system level, we need to shift emphasis from quality as accountability to *quality as transformation* — linking quality improvement to learning.

Transformation is dependent on the dialectical interrelationship between the individual academic and the higher education system, mediated by the institutional infrastructure, cross-cut by disciplinary allegiances. This complexity comes to the fore when we consider two issues that currently loom large in higher education:

- quality;
- innovation in pedagogy.

They are important, internationally, because of the impact of increasing student numbers and decreasing levels of resourcing, of increasing demands being laid on higher education to ensure economic competitiveness in a global market and pressure to ensure internationally comparable standards of courses.

Yet there is little evidence that quality monitoring and innovations in teaching and learning are pulling in the same direction (Figure 3). At the institutional level, quality monitoring procedures and innovation in teaching and learning interface, if at all, through the dissemination of good practice.

External quality monitoring (EQM), the form in which quality is most readily made tangible, makes no attempt, in most countries, to encourage quality learning. On the contrary it tends to be conservative, driven by accountability requirements.

I would not wish to deny that such accountability *can* lead to reform of teaching, learning and the curriculum. However, it is not a *direct* influence on the quality of learning nor is it likely to have a *sustained* impact. Indeed, EQM ought to carry a health warning. Accountability may damage learning by diverting academic staff's attention away from the improvement of learning, to compliance with the bureaucratic imperative and to attempts to improve performance on indicators that are, at the very best, poor operationalisations of learning quality.

I doubt I would be accused of being overly cynical should I harbour the suspicion that accountability procedures are underpinned by an imperative to make higher education more cost-efficient, rather than to improve the quality of learning.

However, research has suggested that key stakeholders in higher education (students, graduates, teachers, administrators, employers) have a definite view that quality is related to the learning process (Harvey, 1993). That is not to say that they are unmindful of funding considerations, but rather to observe that, for them, the test of quality lies in the experiences of learning.

Students and staff emphasise the process of learning, while employers and graduates emphasise desirable outcomes. The two are not incompatible, nor, indeed, do employer preferences pose any threat to the academic integrity of degree courses or to academic freedom. The qualities that employers seek are ones that can be advanced by using certain ways of working within degree programmes and by ensuring that a good range of learning activities is provided.

I am convinced that in Sweden you have learned a lot from the mistakes and ill-thought out systems in other countries. I think the process being developed by the National Agency provides a real opportunity to:

- focus primarily on improvement rather than accountability;
- relate quality improvement to the enhancement of student learning.

In the end, this approach requires structured encouragement of a process of continuous quality improvement driven by those who can make an impact at the staff-student interface. In short, it requires a process of improvement that is owned and controlled from the bottom-up but inspired and monitored from the top-down.

I think, in Sweden that you have the potential to link quality and learning. I suggested, on a recent visit to three very different Swedish higher education institutions that the Swedish approach is characterised by the following:

- improvement orientation;
- centred on local responsibility;

- non-prescriptive, encourages a variety of methods;
- requires minimum necessary information;
- emphasises practical results and operational feedback;
- driven bottom-up rather than top-down.

There was general agreement with all of these except the last, where it was felt that potentially, the system would emphasise bottom-up control but currently it was rather heavily lead by top-down initiatives.

Audit improvement.

In most countries there is a need to move from assessing provision to *auditing improvement*. You can build this in from the outset in Sweden. In countries like Britain, we need a more forward looking, less burdensome approach. My own institution is faced with a plethora of internal and external quality and standards processes involving an enormous network of information flows (Figure 4).

I would like to suggest a simple system of external quality monitoring (EQM) that places emphasis on a process of continuous improvement driven by the people who can effect real change—the teachers, students and learning support staff.

What might this look like? First, we need to make a clear distinction between quality and academic standards. Academic standards should remain the preserve of academics within institutions supported, where appropriate by external examiners and professional and regulatory bodies. Second, quality should be subject to a single system. One that *audits continuous improvement* rather than assesses existing provision or procedures.

Research, discussion and anecdote from around the world illustrates that the most significant element of existing EQM methodologies is self-assessment, which promotes a process of open, responsive collegial reflection on purpose, procedures and practice (Karlsen and Stensaker, 1995; Rasmussen, 1995; Rear, 1994; Rovio-Johansson and Ling, 1995; Saarinen, 1995). This element, more than such things as peer review and statistical indicators, offers the basis for a bottom-up process of continuous quality improvement (CQI) combined with top-down internal and external audit.

The key to a new approach is to identify meaningful teams operating at the learner-teacher interface. These teams should own and set a continuous improvement agenda. Each team, for example a group of staff teaching a ‘course’ along with student representatives, would set a quality improvement agenda. Rather than the typical course annual report — a retrospective account, written by a tired course director at the end of an academic year that gets filed away and forgotten until the next report has to be written — the continuous quality improvement agenda would be a team-written document at the start of the year identifying not what had happened but what *improvements* will be made in the forthcoming twelve months. Each year the

effectiveness and outcomes of last year's improvements strategy would be evaluated and a new twelve-month strategy initiated.

Each team-based CQI agenda would be subject to a 360 degree review by the appropriate dean or head of services, by students and by other teams within the same faculty (Figure 5). This process of 360 degree review would lead not only to the projection of sensible and manageable strategies for improvement but also act as a check on the veracity of improvement claims.

A central internal quality monitoring (IQM) unit collates the reports (including, if appropriate one from the deans and heads of services acting as a middle-management team, subject to a similar 360 degree review). Where there may be concern about the veracity of any report, they should undertake an audit using whatever procedure is appropriate to confirm the content. The unit may also wish to undertake periodic or random audits. A university-wide overview and improvement strategy (including long-term plans), produced by a senior management team including the Vice-Chancellor, would be added to the team reports and the composite document would constitute the university quality report.

This would be the sum total of the quality documentation produced by the institution on an annual basis. EQM would then involve an audit of this quality report in much the same way that the financial accounts are audited. This may occur on an annual, periodic or random basis. Such audits may include inspections, peer review, reference to documentation or statistical indicators as appropriate but would focus entirely on improvement agendas and would comment on the veracity of claims, the appropriateness of the strategy and highlight good practice. The institution quality report and the audit report would be published documents.

This process is simple, emphasises continuous improvement, places the onus on those who can affect change, and gives them ownership and control while engendering a responsive and responsible approach. Accountability approaches have been successful in initiating a quality culture, it is now time for a quantum leap into a new improvement-led approach that will be sustainable in the diverse and radically different system of higher education in the 21st Century.

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