

RESPONSE

Playing to the numbers

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Ben Martin asks a critical question: why have universities and faculty members been so quiescent in their response to government demands for centralized management and the resulting growth in the academic bureaucracy? Anyone watching universities closely knows about increased attempts at external control and regulation, micro-management by government, and institutional preoccupation with an eclectic combination of international rankings and performance metrics. Governments and universities debate the best measures, expand evaluative capabilities and otherwise look for ways to manage universities, simultaneously it seems, as intellectual collegiums, professional associations and retail stores.

Martin ends his impressive piece with the old ‘boiling the frog’ analogy. Be warned, he suggests, for faculty members may soon discover that they have eroded their ‘sense of integrity, self-worth and dignity, becoming mere cogs in the higher education machine’. I think Martin is right, but my opinion differs in one respect. I believe that the point of no return is in the rear-view mirror and no longer lies in front of us. Further, I do not think this is a function of neo-liberalism or market-driven political ideology, but instead reflects the unexpected and unintended consequences of governments responding to university demands for additional financial support.

Ironically, it appears that the self-interest of universities and faculty members may have led the institutions down this worrisome path. Calculated institutional and system-wide decisions, designed to align universities with national political objectives and to secure major increases in funding, essentially sold the soul of the academy. The university system got what it wanted – more institutions, more faculty positions, more research funding, better facilities – while seemingly expecting no greater government and public demands. Oddly, universities seemed to believe so strongly in their invincibility, their uniqueness and the justness of the academic enterprise that they discounted the possibility that governments and the public at large would demand real and demonstrable societal value.

In retrospect, the path leading to the current situation is quite clear. In the 1970s, universities were important but far from central institutions. They educated the elite, provided interesting and occasionally foundational research. Faculty members were attracted by the lifestyle, the status and the opportunity to educate the next generation of leaders. This was not an ideal world to be sure, and the substantial exclusion of female, ethnic minority and working class students from classrooms limited institutional impact and relevance.

Responding to an expanding global and high technology economy and a seemingly insatiable demand for graduates, universities offered national governments compelling arguments for more funding. The money was forthcoming and used to expand the university system from one that served the intellectual elite to one that provided access for many. Institutions then expanded their claims for government attention, arguing that investment in research would create new products and services and generate new businesses, which in turn would employ the thousands of additional graduates being generated annually. Universities argued for more money for research, additional faculty members to conduct the research, funding for graduate students and research facilities, and more classroom space for the hundreds of thousands of additional students recruited into university programmes.

To be fair, the universities produced what they believed was appropriate. Research expanded enormously. The number of postgraduate students exploded globally, seemingly on the unexamined assumption that there were enough talented and motivated people to complete advanced studies, that university expansion would provide jobs for thousands of new Ph.D.s and that the ‘knowledge economy’ would absorb the rest. At undergraduate level, swollen ranks of students around the world anticipated a rapid transition into the paid workforce. Judged by the standards universities set for themselves, the system was performing well.

But governments and the public wanted – and thought they had been promised – other things. They cared more about patents and new companies than H-index returns and scholarly monographs, more about jobs secured than graduates produced, more about national economic competitiveness than the *Times Higher Education* world rankings, more about effective teaching than the number of students squeezed into classrooms. Business incubators impressed them more than major academic congresses. Governments worried much more about impacts on society than faculty satisfaction; universities, in contrast, focused on attracting and retaining the best researchers (less so the best teachers), attracting sufficient students to meet expenses, and enhancing their status among rival institutions.

The difference in priorities set by governments and universities sits, I believe, at the centre of the contemporary debate about measurement and the professional management of post-secondary education. Governments believe that they are paying for specific and clearly-articulated outcomes. Universities believe so strongly in institutional autonomy that they struggle with the idea of being fully accountable to the people paying the bills, whether the money comes from government subsidies or student tuition fees. Furthermore, university faculty often resist even minor innovation in internal accountability or cost management. They particularly resent efforts to tie academic programmes to student enrolment – cancelling small-enrolment humanities courses in favour of expanding high-demand business offerings – preferring to stand aloof from such concerns as graduate employability, the commercialization of research and socio-economic engagement with the broader community.

As governments struggled to explain and justify the expenditure of vast sums on universities (to themselves and the voters as much as anyone else), they realized the potential value of evaluation and performance measures. When Margaret Thatcher introduced such intrusive systems in the United Kingdom, they were tolerated, but barely, as short-term anomalies. But as subsequent governments revised and expanded oversight measures, it became clear that the evaluation revolution would not end soon.

Universities are fine and valuable institutions. When they work well, their achievements are remarkable. Intelligent, motivated students develop impressive insights and improve

their professional skills. Brilliant faculty members produce world-changing research that challenges fundamental assumptions and establishes new directions in scientific and technological development. The best universities and the best programmes produce the young professionals who staff the world's best companies, institutions and government departments.

Universities have significant roles to play in the modern world, but there is no agreement – and not even significant conversation – about the appropriate scale, funding and expectations for universities. Feeling the pressure to add more university places, expand research funding, provide higher salaries and otherwise spend more money on universities, governments have started to ask serious questions about what they are getting for their money. The new culture of measurement and evaluation is here to stay, and there is little sign that governments intend to return to the days of institutional autonomy and limited official oversight. As Martin argues, even as universities benefitted from the additional funding and official attention, they did not appreciate the implications of being pulled into the vortex of official evaluation and government oversight.

A managerial revolution has taken place which is unlikely to be overturned. At times, it seems that accountants play as important a role in shaping the modern university as academic leaders. A growing public preoccupation with practical results (real and decently-paid jobs and commercially viable research) is putting the squeeze on publicly-funded universities. The traditional university system, where co-managed institutions established academic priorities based on intellectual trends and faculty priorities, seems like a quaint affectation, held dear by faculty members, accepted by administrators working under strong external pressures, and resented by governments struggling to encourage universities to respond to societal needs.

Universities should be nervous about becoming immersed in a world of measurement. The problem is simple. For more than 30 years, universities have made elaborate promises in order to attract increased funding for post-secondary education. Their approach can be summarized by way of the now globalized 'innovation formula'. It goes like this:

- governments and families invest in mass education and produce many university graduates;
- governments and companies invest in basic research and produce research papers and studies; and
- governments and universities support the commercialization of research, with the goal of producing new companies.

In return, the formula promises:

- more high-paying jobs, including for the growing number of university graduates;
- more companies, ready and able to compete in the modern economy; and
- general prosperity for all.

It sounds lovely and would be truly impressive had it worked. But it has not.

It turns out that only a finite number of students has the ability, motivation and curiosity to really benefit from a university education. In consequence, the numbers entering university are much higher than the numbers graduating. There is also only a finite number of decently-paid jobs awaiting university graduates, particularly for those graduating from non-professional programmes. Academic research, experience shows, translates slowly into commercial ventures, and the national return from investment in basic research is much

smaller than the sector suggests. And those university units supposed to stimulate the commercialization of university research? How could people expect bureaucratic processes, run by salaried institutional employees, to produce dozens of profitable companies?

There are successes in each area – brilliant graduates who get great jobs, research discoveries that create real wealth and commercialization efforts that transform a rough idea into a commercially successful venture – but the results are uneven. Across the United States, for example, only half the students who start four-year degree programmes actually graduate. The results are better in countries with more selective entrance standards. The underemployment of university graduates has become a global problem, evident in east Asia, northern Africa, the Middle East and much of Europe. More worrisome are serious doubts about the academic teaching enterprise with questions being asked about the effectiveness of undergraduate education in improving basic skills.

Put simply, universities cannot deliver on what they implicitly promised to governments. The expectations were always unrealistic. As a result, university operations cannot, in many instances, really withstand sustained scrutiny. Unless they change the denominators – and governments are unlikely to budge from their emphasis on accessibility (taking more students), learning outcomes (teaching them more effectively), graduation and employment rates (pass more students and ensure they find good jobs), commercializing research discoveries (turning them into viable products and services) and wealth creation tied to university operations – universities are in for a rough ride.

The universities will lose in two ways. First, the injection of managerial techniques will continue to challenge academic oversight and priorities. This struggle is of little interest off campus, but will engulf universities in lengthy and acrimonious internal battles. Second, in order to keep the cash flowing in ever larger amounts, universities have promised to contribute directly to the economic well-being of their communities and countries. The two together mean that universities will have to sublimate their institutional planning and academic priorities to broader societal needs.

The old days, when scholars united to protect the integrity of the academy and were only gradually swayed by new intellectual currents, are largely gone. In their place is a new order, dominated by professional academic administrators, negotiations with government and business, and greater attention to workforce realities. Universities absorb large sums of public and private money, all the while promising government that they are leading the way in preparing region and country for the realities of the twenty-first century.

There is a great deal wrong with this scenario, for both universities and governments. Neither will be satisfied with the current trajectory. The recent sharp decline in humanities enrolments suggests that students and parents are alert to employment realities. The focus on universities and the weak employment outcomes for graduates has taken attention away from a more troubling development, namely the sharp decline in secure, well-paid middle class work in much of the industrialized world. Universities are not the answer, by themselves, to major shifts in the workforce and the global economy. As a result of selling themselves as the central solution for twenty-first century challenges, universities face the possibility of being held responsible (inappropriately) for a shifting labour market, widespread technological change and new global competitive realities.

Ben Martin has rightly asked ‘What’s happening to our universities?’. The answer is that universities, by putting their interests first and by attempting to capitalize on government and public worries about the changing world order, oversold their contributions, over-promised

on deliverables, and created conditions where governments appear to have lost confidence in them. In consequence, governments are increasingly reviewing and evaluating university performance in a serious and sustained attempt to make universities address public needs and government aspirations.

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