A Tale of Two Disciplines: Reflections on the State of the Humanities and the Sciences at Universities

'A university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society…It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them.'

***John Henry Newman** – The Idea of a University*

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Introduction

Although a funding crisis in South African higher education may seem like a distant challenge, current problems experienced by the sector in the United Kingdom offer a valuable opportunity for policy-makers back home. Two years, more recently reading for a Master's degree in Higher Education Policy, have offered me a ringside seat to watch this 'battle' unfold. And while one may be exasperated by the overuse of 'war' words – the 'war' on waste, the 'battle' for the soul of the party, the 'fight' against corruption, *ad infinitem* – it is peculiar that these phrases have come to describe the mainstream debate in academia. Managers and the government resemble anything war-like tends to be a matter of opinion. But, that those engaged in this debate see it in as stark terms as they do, stresses the need for South African decision-takers to be even more careful. The British example is a lesson in unintended consequences; and, so how South Africa meets its developmental challenges, with universities playing a central role in that process, means that we should be making the best decisions we can now to avoid these problems worsening in the future. Internecine warfare engulfing our universities, places where our "ideals of democratic liberty are enshrined",[1] is something that we should do everything to avoid.

The Disfiguring of Higher Education

The resignation of Dame Marina Warner of her professorship at the University of Essex, in protest at what she describes at length as the 'disfiguring of higher education',[2] is a case in point. Warner, a recent recipient of the Holberg Prize in recognition of her scholarship, has written that "(her) department was freighted to breaking point with imperious and ill-conceived demands from much higher up in the food chain – from people who don't teach or research at all, or if they ever did, think humanities departments work like science departments."[3]

As *The Guardian* recently noted, "Warner has found herself, rather reluctantly, at the forefront of the struggle to defend the humanities against assaults from within and without the universities."[4] In her visceral critique of Essex,[5] Warner took aim at what

she sees as the privatisation of higher education. The march towards corporatism is evidenced by the "sprawling management class"[6] specifically employed to force these changes – funding cuts, rationalisation exercises, performance management regimes, and so on. Although this 'business-speak' may seem out of place in the genteel world of academia, this kind of cross-over is now the norm. The humanities, The Guardian argues, are particularly susceptible to this unfair treatment because "(its) products are necessarily less tangible and effable than their science and engineering peers (and less readily yoked to the needs of the corporate world)…"[7]

Reference is often made to how universities operated in the past. So the argument goes, universities were better funded, more generous to students, and more conducive to letting the humanities flourish. This may be true. However, nostalgic recollections of the past can obscure a true appreciation of what actually was. In particular, universities were by-and-large elitist (catering to a select few), compounding rather than alleviating class difference (and poverty). By catering to a smaller number of students, universities may have seemed better funded because the ratios were disproportionately in favour of the select few. So too, universities may have been given more money than they deserved: the asymmetry of power between elites and the masses skewed the distribution of resources. As power shifted, however, with the extension of the franchise and the recognition of rights of previously oppressed groups, the ability of elites to be entirely self-serving could no longer be sustained. Accordingly, universities faced a funding crisis in the context of broader societal change – and new demands for funding. The need to address underdevelopment, for example, in previously all-black communities after the fall of Apartheid is an appropriate example. It is ironic, then, that universities of yesteryear would be looked to as the best-practice model when they were arguably at their most unequal.

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Universities, then, have to do more with less and, increasingly, have to become self-sufficient. And even though innovative funding solutions may be more popular – such as joint business ventures between universities and businesses, particularly in the area of research and development – they, too, are open to fair criticism. Given the influence their money buys them, businesses can – and do – determine research agendas. Universities, then, face the temptation of focusing on cash-cows: research for private use (and profit) that brings in a lot of money. These raise significant questions about universities' functional independence. Governance decisions can be prejudiced by the need to attract said funding and institutional biases can form around those commercial decisions. Cross-subsidisation may be a motive but the reality is that much of the universities' 'profit' is absorbed by snowballing bureaucracies. But, considering the general squeeze on tertiary funding, these are also useful. Much science research, especially, is expensive and requires high start-up costs: things universities can hardly afford but which they benefit from. This influence also acts as an important link to the market: universities have a responsibility to teach but also make their students employable.

Financial pressures, then, are also of concern in the funding of students. As universities receive less, additional personal responsibility is passed onto learners themselves. In an unequal society like South Africa, that is particularly harmful where access to capital - let alone disposable income on education spending - is a rarity for

the many. Although the state has mechanisms to address these funding gaps – in recognition of how important tertiary education is to our transformational project – stories of its mismanagement are horrifying.[8] Further, skewed understandings of the relative value of STEM subjects[9] as opposed to the humanities in a country with an acute skills shortage like ours means that funding from various sources is more readily available for the sciences as opposed to other disciplines. Ironically, however, the beneficiaries of this support is dwarfed by the numbers of students who are matriculants of a poor secondary education system and do not have the critical skills to undertake STEM study and so flood humanities classrooms. This situation, despite what our needs may be, is condoned by both university managers and government departments alike: more bodies in chairs mean higher government subsidies and better transformation statistics under the government's narrow bean-counting interpretation of transformation.

The Problem of the Humanities

The humanities especially suffers in this transactional relationship, because the knowledge they produce is not as commercially viable and garners less market interest. Thus, universities can – and do – slant towards the sciences providing then with greater institutional support: more fellowships, bigger research grants, and so on. And, given the lower investment needed to run humanities classrooms, lecturers are made to teach high class numbers. Humanities students' fees cross-subsidise other expenses within the university. They also suffer because mechanisms of management are unsuited to what the humanities subjects do. Outputs, results, and impacts are easier to discern as a result of experiments rather than an extended period of scholarship in a niche area of study. This situation is further exacerbated by students who bear the personal cost of their education seeking to gain skills that make them employable as opposed to knowledgeable. In the market place economy, spending as little time in university to acquire skills that should gain a graduate meaningful employment to meet their – and often their families' – debts is of primary concern. The disjunction between academics who may want to teach for the pursuit of knowledge and students who want to do a bare minimum – as encouraged by university managers who seem to treat students as cattle to be processed rather than scholars in training – harms humanities particularly harshly.

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This is particularly relevant where academics are facing a 'casualisation' of their profession. Lecturers no longer enjoy tenure, job security, or good pay. Rather, many lecturers are forced into contract work (sometimes even being paid by the hour) with exploitative conditions attached to continued and/or permanent employment. Most notably, conditional employment (either getting a job to begin with or keeping it thereafter) is dependent on an academic's ability to attract (large) funding grants or deliver 'outcomes'. The critique that 'business speak' and 'business models' of running universities is inappropriate and unhelpful has some merit: universities are, categorically, not businesses – they are not about making a profit. As such, many of the practices imported into university management may yield unhelpful results. While a degree of uncertainty may, theoretically, be useful to act as an incentive to pressurise lecturers into working 'harder', the reality is that this low morale environment acts as a disincentive for many scholars to join, or remain in,

academia. This hollowing out of the profession means that critical thinkers move into other industries which means, while they may be making a high impact, their potential contribution toward knowledge generation is squandered. Unlike business strategies, success cannot be measured in as tangible a way: an increase in market share is easier to discern than a novel idea of conceptualising gender relations in the ancient world. While scientists may be able to more readily adapt to this commercial environment, the humanities are particularly vulnerable: even best seller books have limited consumption beyond the field.

Although this may point to a problem of how our academics achieve 'impact' – another contested buzzword that has entered the academic management lexicon – there is a rational basis to try and bring greater accountability and professional discipline into academia. The problem, as Nicholas Kristof, writing in the *New York Times*, put it, "Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don't matter in today's great debates."[10] The reason for this is twofold: on the one hand, the kinds of academic research academics undertake are judged to be irrelevant/esoteric/arcane; and, on the other, they do not see the value in engaging in societal issues, preferring the rigours of academia rather than the laxity of social commentary. Scientists may be less prone to this assault: science, after all, is similar whether conducted in a university or commercial research laboratory. And, for professional scientists, high academic qualifications and interest are crucial to their career advancement. Humanities students and academics don't have it that easy because what they do is not as readily quantifiable. But, it would be a mistake to dismiss them – even seemingly irrelevant research has certain benefits.

The ruling elite have humanities degrees because they can do critical thinking, they can test premises, they can think outside the box, they can problem-solve, they can communicate, they don't have linear, one-solution models with which to approach the world. You won't solve the problems of religious fundamentalism with a science experiment.'

Sarah Churchwell, a prominent public intellectual and professor of American literature at the University of East Anglia, argues that "there's something quite sinister"[11] about the treatment being meted out to the humanities. "Virtually every cabinet minister has a humanities degree…they get their leadership positions after studying the humanities and then they tell us what we need is a nation of technocrats. The ruling elite have humanities degrees because they can do critical thinking, they can test premises, they can think outside the box, they can problem-solve, they can communicate, they don't have linear, one-solution models with which to approach the world. You won't solve the problems of religious fundamentalism with a science experiment."[12]

Churchwell's reproach of the discourse within academia also deserves mentioning. She warns against a "two cultures mentality" where the sciences and humanities square off against each other to scrap for whatever is doled out from the cabinet table. Rather, she says that they're "on the same side … (it's) a divide and conquer strategy … They are creating a zero-sum game." And Churchwell also argues the caricature of academics – dinosaurs from another era who publish nothing after being appointed and sit around in stuffy common rooms, dressed in tweed and drinking too much port – is specious. Apart from the natural incentive to keep working and producing – the stuff that enhances academics' reputation, their teaching curriculum, and the

chance to win financially lucrative prizes as Warner has recently done – academics have their own professional identity which they seek to protect. The way they do so is by working. While there may be "some dead wood" [13] the fanciful notions of underperforming dons being the norm is inaccurate. Professionalisation, then, is good, but what needs to be guarded against is a misapplication of distinguishable cultures and practices.

The Research Excellence Framework

A useful case to understand these competing, though sometimes complimentary, ideas is the United Kingdom's REF exercise. The REF (or Research Excellence Framework) is:

> "an exercise that assesses the quality of academic research ... The results determine how much research funding (universities) are granted … and they're used to determine institutions' rankings in league tables. A poor performance can close a department, while a top rating means steady funding ... Every six years, institutions are asked to submit examples of their best research to be assessed by a team of academics and industry experts. Each subject area is awarded up to four stars. The process is designed to ensure that public money is spent effectively … only subject areas that were awarded three and four stars secured research funding." [14]

Apart from the vagueness and ambiguity of the measures used, she (as do many others) also takes issue with how this universalist approach is being forced onto diverse disciplines that have very little in common with each other – ranging from content, skills biases, cultures, etc.

Unsurprisingly, "the methodology used to assess university research has changed, provoking controversy among academics. The big difference is that research is now judged partly on the impact it has had outside of academia – this accounts for 20% of the overall score. By giving a weighting to impact, the government hopes to reward universities that engage with business and civil society. But academics have complained that this demand adds an extra layer of bureaucracy." [15]

Warner has savaged the REF process as a meaningless exercise.[16] Apart from the vagueness and ambiguity of the measures used, she (as do many others) also takes issue with how this universalist approach is being forced onto diverse disciplines that have very little in common with each other – ranging from content, skills biases, cultures, etc. One has some sympathy for Warner, who also points out that these tick-box exercises may look good on paper and in annual financial statements, they detract from teaching and research. Academics are now meant to be self-promoters, fundraisers, publicity hacks too. But, one can also see why this kind of exercise is useful: by identifying and applying rigorous standards of measurement across the board, a mechanism of evaluating competing claims (for funding, impact, etc) becomes possible. Additionally, specified standards of conduct mean that performance assessments are predictable and can be rationalised. Very importantly, they also create goals that academics and departments can work towards. The ever-present danger, however, is that form is put ahead of substance: that work is done to meet the REF, rather than the REF being used as a means to measure the quality of work. The humanities disciplines are most likely to see these shifts occur as their vulnerability within the university organism (as against the sciences), and the difficulty to apply these types of measures to them, can jeopardise their academic focus in order to fight their corner in funding rounds.

This dislocation in identity also plays itself out in other ways. The 'teaching vs. research' debate is a good example: academics see their role as being more research-centric but university managers see them as primarily being teachers; consuming resources vs. bringing them in. The underlying tension this speaks to is how universities manage their knowledge distribution and knowledge generation roles. What this argument often muddies, however, is the need for both elements to be accommodated within the university model: teaching is needed to bring in income to sustain research, and research is pointless if it cannot be communicated through teaching. Biases in the form of research and teaching intensive universities are not impossible but, in the current 'mixed' model which prevails, both elements need to be present. The warning here, then, is that a one-size-fits all approach needs to be guarded against – and this, possibly, even extends to how humanities subjects are judged against scientific ones.

Conclusion

Market needs influencing university research trajectories demonstrate the kind of accommodation needed: universities should maintain their academic character pursuing knowledge but should equally be subjected to the positive aspects of market forces. Universities may be perceived as indicators of society's progress and, indeed, have a role to play in achieving that progress but when genuine attempts are made to transform them such efforts are treated with suspicion.

This is not to discredit Warner's critiques. Many of them are justified. But universities have enjoyed a high degree of isolation – and while they may have given rise to those who have implemented wider societal change, they may have not always kept up with it themselves. Undoubtedly some reforms which are implemented vary between being banal if not stupid (such as the increasing 'management consulting' culture that has taken hold within universities) whereas others could be construed as being more sinister (such as reorganisation of university departments to force out critics and clamp down on academic freedom). It is not always clear where these decisions fall on the spectrum, or whether the introduction of greater means of accountability in university departments could qualify for this purpose, but an uncompromising attitude taken by either administrators, on the one hand, or academics, on the other, is not conducive to maximising universities' power.

In this war of words, where the stakes are not that high, it would be wise to recall Alexander Herzen's acute observation that 'the point is to open men's eyes, not to tear them out." [17]

FOOTNOTES

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1 Warner, M. 2015. 'Learning My Lesson: Marina Warner on the Disfiguring of Higher Education'. London Review of Books.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Preston, A. 2015. 'The War Against Humanities at Britain's Universities'. The Guardian.
5 Note 1 above.
6 Note 4 above.
7 Note 4 above.
8 See, for example, a cross-section of statements by the DA Shadow Minister of Education, Dr Belinda Bozzoli, MP: http://www.da.org.za/tag/belinda-bozzoli/.
9 STEM subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.
10 Kristoff, N. 2014. 'Professors, We Need You!' New York Times.
11 Note 4 above.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ratcliffe, R. 2014. 'REF 2014: Why is it such a Big Deal?' The Guardian.
15 Ibid.
16 Note 4 above.
17 Berlin, I. 1978. Russian Thinkers.