

We build the road as we travel: Reconfiguring the university

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The starting premise of this paper is that the overwhelming majority of universities in OECD countries have been transformed from being social organisations to financial, capitalist economy ones. That is, universities have moved away from being organisations based on the social exchange of knowledge (through research and teaching) for facilities, status and recognition towards more contractually-based corporate entities in which they undertake teaching or research work for payment. The change has occurred as universities have become significantly aligned to neoliberal economies, serving the interests of capital in terms of economically exploitable knowledge and credentialised students (Boden and Epstein 2006).

Key to this transition has been significant organisational change. Rather than being socially-orientated, high-trust, self-directed organisations with collegiate control, universities are increasingly managerially driven and controlled, hierarchical organisations which compete in markets against each other. Universities are now characterised as low-trust, with significant and burdensome regimes of surveillance and audit.

This transition, we argue in this paper, has adverse implications in two dimensions. First, with regard to students and teaching, the progressive withdrawal of state funding has shifted the incidence of the cost of higher education onto students. The growing cadre of the (often well-paid) managerial classes further increases the financial cost to students. In a globalised and massified environment, curriculum and pedagogy have become constrained and driven by perceived employer needs, reducing the prospect of radical pedagogies and curricula determined by student need (Boden and Nedeva 2010). The changes therefore have significant social justice implications. Second, with regard to knowledge creation, universities are now under a growing imperative to produce codified and (mainly) economically useful knowledge to support the interests of the knowledge economy. This drives research agendas and the rewards for knowledge creation, shaping rewards and promotions and, ultimately, the academic identities.

The dominance of the capitalist form of enterprise in a number of economies is increasingly being challenged by social economy forms such as cooperatives and mutuels. These heterogeneous forms are loosely united by principles of users (workers or consumers) owning the enterprise, are self-directed and independent. They are primarily committed to the common interests of members and thus tend to have a wider remit than capitalist firms, which exist primarily to maximise profit.

This paper reports on ongoing work on the prospects for developing existing universities as such social economy enterprises. We posit that a cooperative university form would have the following attributes.

1. Ownership of the physical capital of the university (its estate) would reside in social hands via some form of trust arrangement. However, the primary capital of a university is the intellectual capital of the academics and students within it. Therefore, in a cooperative university, and via means such as academic freedom, ownership and control of the primary asset would be with the academics and students.

2. The members of the cooperative would be its users – the academic and other workers and the students. It would also be possible, using the Mondragon University model (Wright et al 2011) to include wider civil society and economic entities as members as they are also ultimate users of the university. Membership would be on a cooperative rather than customer-contractor basis.
3. The cooperative university would be self-managed and largely without hierarchical control. This would allow all members to design and develop the curricula and pedagogic approaches and to determine research agendas. It would also significantly reduce costs, providing financial benefit to students and enhancing available resources.
4. Being collaborative rather than competitive organisations, universities could more successfully contribute to wider society, the economy and culture.

We argue that such new organisational forms could successfully address the problems with teaching and knowledge creation evident with the current modes. In terms of teaching, co-operative universities could significantly reduce costs and radicalise both pedagogy and curriculum, strengthening social justice and democracy as well as benefiting the economy and culture. In terms of research, co-operatisation could enhance academic freedom, liberating the research imagination, whilst binding knowledge workers closer to knowledge users (students and surrounding society actors).

The core argument of this paper is that the reconfiguration of universities as cooperatives in this form in the UK is, remarkably, relatively unproblematic. First, as with the co-op schools movement in the UK, government deregulation opens up the prospect of autonomous development to universities. Second, the physical assets of public universities are already in social/state hands – this simply needs clarifying. Intellectual capital, de facto, already resides with academics and students. Third, the fact that most academic knowledge activity is not organisationally but field-based offers significant prospects for academics to exercise their agency reconfigure the academy. HE policy on teaching and research is organisationally-based. Yet the work itself, especially in knowledge creation, is based largely in networked knowledge fields. It is from the fields that academics produce authoritative research, form and participate in learned societies (such as SRHE) and are invited to join significant research organisations, such as the REF.

Our conclusion is that the development of social economy university forms, such as co-operatives, offers significant prospects for beneficial transformation of higher education.

References

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