In Pursuit of "Feasible Utopias"[1]:
Constructing Identity and Practice in British Columbia's New Universities

Abstract:

Within countries such as the UK, Australia and Canada, specifically British Columbia, the development of universities reveals partially overlapping stories of university sectors that have shifted between binary and unitary models in adapting to meet mass access demands, to accommodate increased technical and vocational education needs, and to adjust to declining state funding. These jurisdictions are now replete with institutions sharing the university name while pursuing differentiated missions. Building on previous research, this study employs a social constructionist approach and grounded theory methods in the compilation and analysis of textual evidence from quality assurance guidelines, legislation, system reviews, and institutional documents pertinent to BC's university sector. The primary focus is on reviewing the extent to which established university practice boundaries concerning autonomy, governance, programming, research, faculty, and quality assurance are shaping the new universities and / or the extent to which they are re-shaping these practice boundaries.

Paper Outline:

Notwithstanding the pluralism characterizing the university as an idea over its history, the majority of universities in existence today have been established in the past one hundred years proceeding from conceptions offered by Newman and Humboldt (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, and Teichler, 2007). However, from the latter half of the twentieth century to present day, profound shifts have occurred within universities as a result of intensified demands for mass access and socio-economic relevance in industrial and post-industrial societies (Rothblatt, 1997; Bleiklie, 2007; Bleiklie, Laredo, and Sorlin, 2007; Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, and Teichler, 2007). For public institutions in particular, a sense has emerged that the university should function more as a market-driven organization responsive

to the interests of local and global communities, governments, and industry as a condition of both the funding that it receives and the societal service mandate that it espouses (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Clark, 1998; Bleiklie, 2007).

Within countries such as the UK, Australia and Canada (specifically British Columbia (BC)) the historical development of universities reveals at least partially overlapping stories of university sectors that have shifted between binary and unitary models in adapting to meet mass access demands, to accommodate increased technical and vocational education needs, and to adjust to declining state funding. These jurisdictions are now replete with institutions sharing the university name while pursuing a "multiplicity of missions" (Scott, 2006, p. 33). In each, the common name describes those that are research-intensive and almost exclusively focused on academic and professional programs; those that are more teaching-intensive, and broadly inclusive of vocational, technical and academic programs; and those that situate themselves at different points along this continuum.

One common trend has been the development of dual sector universities (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2006; 2009). Duals are conceptualized as a new form of comprehensive university, offering a range of college preparatory and vocational programs integrated with a range of university degree programs. Their comprehensive focus is on supporting multiple access pathways through more integrated vocational and academic curricula that permits students to bridge from one program to another. In BC, the recent re-designation of former university colleges, an institute, and a community college as universities, may be viewed as an attempt to deal with some access and program integration issues within the context of single institutions rather than across a more segmented higher education system. The new universities are required by legislation to continue the full range of preparatory, vocational, career and academic programming they offered previously.

The challenge for BC's new universities is one of connecting varied practices and programs across the institutional traditions of diverse colleges and universities in a manner that permits them both to retain their institutional integrity and establish their legitimacy as universities within their unique national context and intersecting international contexts. As Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova and Teichler (2007) point out, the "diversity of higher education systems in each national context depends on . . . external and internal boundaries that portray its horizontal and vertical structure . . ." (p. 375). The extent to which the new universities are able to occupy a credible space within the higher education sectors and post-secondary systems in their jurisdictions is dependent upon the extent to which they are viewed as belonging within a stratified university sector. While the university name seems, on the surface, to confer legitimacy, in reality many of the institutions do not comply readily with the prevailing forms and normative expectations of the more established universities, and as such seem out of sync with an "authoritative constitution" of the university (Scott, 1993, p. 4).

Considine (2006) frames the issue of uncertainty concerning university missions and practices as a question of both institutional identity and integrity. In his estimation, the primary challenge facing universities is not funding shortfalls but "environmental transformation," making it "more and more difficult [for universities] to explain what they do that is distinctive" (Considine, 2006, p. 256). Just as Pederson and Dobbin (2006) point out that institutional identity is necessarily an ongoing doubled act, of internal self-conception and external legitimation, Considine (2006) suggests that without the delimitation of appropriate yet contestable boundaries, the university as an institution is at risk. Bleiklie, Laredo, and Sorlin (2007) explore similar integrity issues both "at the global level of the system as a whole and at the local level of its different constitutive entities, universities and other higher education institutions" (p. 366). A central question is whether or not national systems tend toward convergence. Although they suggest that this has not generally been the case to date, Bleiklie's (2007) research

reveals some significant patterns: "One of these is that most systems tend to mix . . . horizontal specialization associated with growing elements of hierarchization and vertical diversity driven by formal standardization: introduction of common degree systems across systems . . . , university 'autonomy' and the growing accountability requirements for public funding" (Bleiklie, Laredo, and Sorlin, 2007, p. 367).

At an institutional level, Laredo (2007) maintains that universities are not simply adding new missions to an already established mix, but that three core missions of universities (teaching, research, public service) are all being re-conceptualized within institutions in relation to three primary areas of functional activity: mass tertiary education to the baccalaureate degree level, specialized training and applied research largely focused at the professional master degree level, and academic training and research through the doctorate degree level. Laredo (2007) speculates that while all universities likely comprise a "unique mix" of these functional activities, their institutional positioning is "often mostly the result of contingent historical factors" (p. 454). For each university, institutional position requires development as "a 'constructed' choice" to facilitate meaningful "articulation of the university with its environment" (Laredo, 2007, p. 454).

Building on previously presented research on university practice boundaries that inform determinations on the legitimacy of universities in BC, this study follows a social constructionist approach and employs grounded theory methods in the collection, organization, and analysis of direct quotations from quality assurance guidelines, legislation, system reviews, and scholarship pertinent to BC's university sector. The primary focus is on reviewing the extent to which established university practice boundaries relating to institutional autonomy, governance, degree programming, research, faculty roles, and quality assurance are shaping the new universities and / or the extent to which the new universities are re-shaping these practice boundaries. In Laredo's (2007) terms, to date, have the new

universities been able to sustain "a 'constructed' choice" that is consistent with their historic identities and deemed legitimate by more established peers?

Endnotes:

[1] The phrase, "feasible utopias," is drawn from Ron Barnett's (2011) *Being a University*, in which he sets out "to identify *positive options*" for universities that are in keeping with the "general character of the structures in which universities and higher education are placed" (p. 4).

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