

AN AUTHORITATIVE CURRICULUM IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Bernard McKenna

Queensland University of Technology


b.mckenna@qut.edu.au

Glen Thomas

Queensland University of Technology

gj.thomas@qut.edu.au

Ironically, employers perceive that university graduates are deficient in independent and critical thought, the very skills that many universities abandoned in their attempt to vocationalise themselves. While vocationalising, universities have also shifted to a consumer-based model of educational delivery. These changes have been occurring within a complex of events and discourses, such as globalisation, reduced government expenditure on education, changed patterns of labour formation, technological development, and neo-liberal individualism. Unfortunately, anti-intellectual managerialism, credentialism, and inappropriate neo-liberal ideology have forced upon academics quite inappropriate models of what a university should be. Nevertheless, this current “universities crisis” has forced a reconsideration what it is that universities are supposed to do. Historically, they have been centres of learning, research sites, and credentialing authorities. This paper




suggests that universities must re-consider their role in the credentialing process in terms of their fundamental roles of contributing to an intelligent and informed citizenry; providing intellectual and artistic development, engagement and reflection; and developing versatile intellects. A liberal education can fulfil these roles because it is committed to democratic processes, rational procedures of inquiry, and reason, tolerance and humanity. More specifically, the paper identifies higher order cognitive skills of synthesis and evaluation, as well as a coherent program of moral awareness that should be built into a university curriculum.

Keywords: graduate skills, critical thinking, role of a university, credentialing, neo-liberalism, liberal education, informed citizenry, vocational universities, Enlightenment Project, cognitive development, moral development

Introduction

The AC Nielsen 1999 survey of Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills reports that the skills in which recent recruits were perceived to be most deficient are problem solving skills, oral business communication skills, and interpersonal skills with other staff (AC Nielsen, 1999, p.22). Specific academic skills that employers perceived university graduates to lack are creativity and flair, capacity for independent and critical thinking, problem solving skills, and the ability to think logically and orderly (AC Nielsen, 1999, pp.36-37). Certainly, these results broadly conform to the results of other surveys overseas; for example, Borin and Watkins's survey of United States employers in various marketing fields (such as advertising, public relations, market research) shows that employers rank 'verbal communication skills' (by which the survey presumably means oral communication skills), decision making, and problem solving within the top ten critical skills employers seek when hiring recent graduates (1998, p.1). Floyd & Gordon's review of the literature on this topic reinforces this pattern. They report that communication skills 'have been found to be important in most studies' (1998, p.2). Floyd & Gordon's own survey of New



Zealand employers found again that problem-solving skills were most important to employers when selecting management graduates, followed by communication skills (particularly written communication), work experience, and interpersonal skills (Floyd & Gordon, 1998, p.5). This study concludes that the 'challenge for educators is to develop problem-solving skills in students and provide them with the means to demonstrate these in a hiring situation (Floyd & Gordon, 1998, p.6).

To return to the Australian research, while the Nielsen report does raise questions of demarcation between putative 'academic' skills and those deemed 'personal' skills (which in the report includes aspects such as grooming and personal presentation), the overall thrust of the findings is both illuminating and suggestive. The illuminating element is that there is a perception among employers that university graduates are deficient in their capacity for independent thought in one or more of its guises, be it problem-solving, critical thought, or logical and orderly thinking. This conclusion accords with the results of similar surveys in the United States and New Zealand. Clearly, there emerges a question here as to how to develop these problem-solving skills in students, which itself becomes a challenge to the university curriculum.

We would at this point introduce a *caveat*, namely that this paper in no way argues that employers should be the determining force that lays out university curricula, as a university that slavishly conforms to the dictates of the employer would, logically, not fulfil the functions of a university at all, but rather become a training area for whatever employer group has the greatest power (or loudest voice, or ear of the Vice-Chancellor).¹ We do argue, though, that the evidence of graduates' lack of problem solving skills, critical thinking, and independent thought that emerges from these studies demonstrates that universities are failing to deliver to their students the attributes necessary both to gain employment and, more generally, to function as effective members of the civil society.

We should also make explicit what we consider the functions of a university should be.

¹ This could also lead to farcical situations whereby surveys of employers may well find that personal hygiene or coffee making might well be desirable attributes of new graduates, which, if the employer is treated as the arbiter of university curricula, would ultimately lead to courses in such areas.



Multiple Roles of a University

One of the few benefits of the current “universities crisis” is that it has forced us to reconsider what it is that universities are supposed to do. We contend that universities have performed three activities as:

- detached centres of learning
- research sites
- credentialing authorities.

Over 150 years ago, Newman (1959) understood the difference between the first two. Quoting the French Cardinal Gerdil, he identified the difference between the academy and the university in these terms:

There is no real opposition between the spirit of the academies and that of the universities: they are only different points of view. Universities are established to teach sciences to students who want to train [in sciences]; the academies intend to do new research in the field of sciences.²

Today, most academics keenly feel the dual need to research and to teach, recognising that really seriously pursuing one is always to the great detriment of the other. The modern day equivalents of, say, the Royal Society might be the Co-operative Research Centres and institutions such as the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research. Many beleaguered academics would surely agree with Cardinal Newman’s assertion that there should be an ‘intellectual division of intellectual labour between academies and universities. To discover and to teach are different functions’ (p. 10).

² This is our translation of:

‘Ce n’est pas qu’il y ait aucune véritable opposition entre l’esprit des Académies et celui des universités; ce sont seulement des vues différentes. Les Universités sont établies pour enseigner les sciences aux élèves qui veulent s’y former; les Académies se proposent de nouvelles recherches à faire dans la carrière des sciences.’ (quoted in Newman, 1959, p. 10)

French translators may offer a better translation.




What should be taught in a university was also quite clearly stated by Newman:

The view taken of a university in these discourses is the following: that it is a place of teaching universal knowledge. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement (Newman, 1959, p. 7).

The content of a university curriculum will be developed later in the paper.

The third activity of a university is its credentialing authority. Over time, universities took up the responsibility for credentialing the traditional professions of medicine, law, and engineering. Even Newman, as Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, established a School of Medicine (Newman, 1959, p. 21). Harvard University, set up “To advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches,” between 1869 and 1909, re-developed the Law and Medical schools and opened the graduate schools of Business and Dental Medicine to supplement its Arts and Sciences schools, considerably enhancing its enrolment, staff size, and endowments. Yet, it is not true, as Bauman (1997) claims, that universities’ ‘last rampart of authority may be, perhaps, the exclusive entitlements of the credentials-certifying agency’. In Australia, technical colleges (now TAFEs) have certified people in areas ranging from construction management, surveying, industrial design, industrial chemistry, and cartography, to optometry and engineering. Commercial pilots have been credentialed by CASA and its various previous incarnations. Even the Australian College of Surgeons and the Certified Practising Accountants, though mostly training in university teaching hospitals and universities, have acted like guilds to credential as they see fit. This was changed with the Dawkinisation of universities, as professional and para-professional occupations were lumped together under the institutional arrangement of a university. Since then, greater school retention rates, government policy aimed at increasing tertiary education, a diminished job market, and rampant credentialism has led to university credentialing all manner of things. Now that university credentialism incorporates Bachelor of Business degrees that include majors in Club Management, Hotel Management, and Sport Management one has to wonder




whether this will lead to a debasing of the university degree. The last of these includes the option of enrolling concurrently in the PGA Certificate in Golf Management Practice, the course of study for which includes courses in Golf Techniques and Skills, and Golf Resort Management (Griffith University); see also University of Queensland's degree in Business majoring in Hospitality, Tourism and Property management including subjects such as Food and Beverage Studies. (University of Queensland, 2000, p. 415).

So what went wrong?

We trace the developments of this situation primarily to the shift within universities to a consumer-based model. We see, however, such a shift also occurring within a broader complex of events and their accompanying discourses; these include globalisation (Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 40-53; Readings, 1996, pp. 49-50, 190-191); reduced government expenditure on education (Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 54-60; Smith & Webster, 1997, p. 2), changed patterns of labour formation (Martin & Schumann, 1996)³, technological development (Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 246-249; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998, pp. 79-81; 100-114), and neo-liberal individualism (duGay, 1996).

These factors have led to an anti-intellectual managerialism in universities that have forced upon academics quite inappropriate models of what a university should be. The core academic ethos involves commitment to truth, reason, untrammelled inquiry, free speech and collegiality, but this is increasingly being turned on its head by rampant anti-intellectual managerialism. (Polya, 2001; see also Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 52). So complete has been the colonisation of academic discourse by corporate / economic discourse that not only are artifacts and processes re-named (eg, student as client; educational product; potential student market), but also the university administrators badly mimic the dispositions and patterns of corporate capital:

³ See also Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999; Harvey, 1990) for an elaboration of the notion of 'Flexibility' as a key concept and practice concerning intensive technological innovation and the disposable use of labour.




while remodelling themselves ever vigorously after the pattern of corporate capital, universities are all too eager, and if not eager then obliged, to cede the right to set the norms, and perhaps most seminally the ethical norms, to its newly embraced prototype and spiritual inspiration. (Bauman, 1997, p. 20)

Such patterns of behaviour betray the valuable and worthwhile traditions of universities, and impose incommensurate values, procedures, and aspirations. We will consider here only the effects of neo-liberal discourses that re-articulate our world in economic terms and assert the primacy of the individual over other concerns.

The rhetoric of university management and student administration is increasingly proclaiming that students are now 'clients' or 'customers', a body whose needs must be satisfied. As Coaldrake approvingly notes, American for-profit and corporate universities 'have no qualms about referring to their students as customers, or to employers as clients' (2000, p.7). He adds that in the for-profit university, the 'focus on "student-as-customer" underlies their selling points of service provision, timeliness and convenience' (2000, p.8). Certainly it is now common for universities to consider carefully their market position and to develop often highly sophisticated campaigns that feature the university as a brand name.⁴ Some of the reasons for this situation are, of course, external. For instance, the gradual decline of government funding over the past twenty years coupled with occasional bursts of savage cuts to operating grants has left many Australian universities reeling. Concomitant with that, the introduction of the HECS payment system, followed by full-fee regimes for both internal and international students, has led to a perception that universities must be 'sold' to potential students to persuade such students to part with their money. More generally, the discourses of management that infect many other service providers within the community at large, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and social security


⁴ Two Queensland examples are our home institution, QUT, which markets itself as 'a university for the real world', and QUT's major competitor, the University of Queensland, which promotes its sandstone tradition with the slogan, 'World class'.



offices, have repositioned the role of these institutions: patients in hospitals and social security claimants, for example, are now increasingly referred to as 'clients'. These shifts within terminology are not ideology-free; rather, they represent the triumph of neo-liberal thought that privileges the individual over the community. People are no longer members of 'the public', but instead are individual clients who, in one form or another, are expected to bear the cost of whatever they receive, be it health care or social security. As Paul du Gay argues, 'from the hospital to the railway station, and from the classroom to the museum, the public sector has found itself translated. Patients, parents, pupils and passengers have all been re-imagined as "customers"' (du Gay, 1996, p.77). Clearly, education is not exempt from these changes within the discourses that shape the relationship of the late-capitalist subject to the State.

Students in Australia and overseas have readily adopted the consumer subject position. Schneider (1998) reports that 'students are paying money – often big money – for a degree, and in the minds of many students, that puts them in the driver's seat' (p. A12). This approach to education is reflected in the increasing incidence of classroom disruption and incivility; such incidents range from the merely annoying ('arriving late and leaving early, napping in the back of the room, carrying on running conversations, reading the newspaper, even bringing portable televisions into class' [Schneider, 1998, p. A12]) to the downright intimidating (students challenging staff to a fight in a dispute over a grade, and verbal abuse⁵). These instances are at the more extreme end of a behavioural spectrum, but they do tally with anecdotal evidence from Australian classrooms. A perception has evolved that the university and its staff are to serve the wants (often presented as needs or demands) of students; the educational experience now includes a focus on convenience and flexibility for the student population. Polya makes the same point in his observation that universities 'are now shifting to being corporate, money-making organisations driven by a bottom line imperative to sell research to private industry and education to fee-paying student clients: 'The problem with this transformation is

⁵ 'When a scholar at Utah State University refused to change a grade, a student screamed at her, "Well, you goddamned bitch, I'm going to the department head, and he'll straighten you out!"' (Schneider, 1998, p.A12).




that the customer is always right, leading to dollar-driven perversion of the academic ethos and academic standards to keep industrial or student clients happy' (Polya 2001).

Some of the complaints that are made about universities are not without justification. Byzantine administration and enrolment procedures, poor teaching, and uneven provision of services (those subject to most frequent complaints would have to be food outlets, libraries, and bookshops, probably in that order) all contribute to a sense of student dissatisfaction with the university experience. Yet as Luizzi argues, when 'we draw on the business model of treating people like customers, we obscure a primary goal of fostering the development of mature, moral agents' (2000, p.2). Part of this process of fostering the development of students is the guidance offered by university staff. The academic teacher, Silber says, should have 'the knowledge and character to merit' their position because they are competent to know what the students need. The academic teacher 'guides and aids the students, but he [sic] does not try to please the students by giving them what they want' (Silber cited in Luizzi, 2000, pp.2-3). In other words, Silber identifies what is effectively a relationship between academic staff and students based on a covenant. This is a situation where, 'in order for teaching to function well, the student must become the agent of learning, one who acts not only in response to the guidance and stimulation of mentors, but who basically takes full responsibility for accomplishing what is desired' (Long, cited in Luizzi, 2000, p.3). This assumes, of course, that academic staff are concerned with the development of their students, and not simply providing a good or service for the student to consume. We argue further that teaching has an ethical component: in this context, that ethic is to prepare students to participate fully in the civil society.

Re-establishing the equilibrium

The equilibrium of the university has been massively disturbed by the credentialing role and the inappropriateness of neo-liberalism, and further that, in doing this, universities have devalued themselves. In looking for a proper role in the postmodern world, Kumar (1997), almost paradoxically looks backward: 'perhaps Newman, Arnold and the others had the right instinct in urging universities not to bow



to contemporary demands but to follow their own path. In the end, as they also believed, society will come to see that in this way it too is best served' (p. 34).

In essence, what the good traditional university developed with its classical liberal education was the notion of self-formation (*bildung*), or "inner virtue" (Kumar, 1997, p. 35) that was both intellectual and moral. Universities' privileged position, Kumar argues, had come about because of their demonstrated capacity to select and develop 'the right kinds of people, in the sense of people who possess a certain moral character and mental outlook' (p.27). In saying this, we know that we leave ourselves open to claims of being patriarchal and imperialist in our assumptions, but we reject this completely. Notwithstanding the patriarchal and imperialist temper of nineteenth century Britain, universities produced outstanding people who filled the mandarin class of the public service and the arts (eg, the BBC).⁶

We agree with Kumar's exhortation that we must defend universities 'in terms of what they alone can do, or do best, rather than in terms of what other institutions can do as well or better' (p. 29). He argues that universities should be seen as 'breathing spaces in life's course ... [that] enable their members ... to do things and to reflect on things for which for the rest of their lives they will have neither the time nor the opportunity'. They should be communities that 'allow for a cross-fertilization of minds on a scale and in a manner not possible anywhere else in society' (p. 29); should be sites of cultural exploration and engagement' (p. 31). What we are proposing, then, is that universities might well re-consider their role in the credentialing process in terms of how that can impact its more fundamental roles of

- substantially contributing to an intelligent and informed citizenry
- providing a site of intellectual and artistic development, engagement and reflection; and
- developing versatile intellects.

⁶ Even its colonial administration of the colonies was, in many ways enlightened and empowering within the possibilities of its time (eg Australia, Canada, New Zealand; see also V.S. Naipaul's views on Britain's administration of India: *The spirit of things*, ABC Radio National, 9 Sept 2001). However, this is a hugely contentious topic that would take a conference in itself.



1. *Intelligent and Informed Citizenry*


A democratic and free society needs an intelligent and informed citizenry capable of acquiring information, and of making judgments based on agreed principles of a rational, tolerant, open, flexible, generous, and compassionate society. Postmodern critics are quick to point to the great civilization producing Dachau or Auschwitz as one of the “grand narratives”. Yet this conveniently glosses over the reality that the intellectual class was one of the great victims (vide: the Frankfurt School), along with Jews, unionists, socialists, and homosexuals of Nazi oppression which was characterised by ignorance; inhumane uses of technology; and bureaucratic efficiency.

2. *Site of Intellectual and Artistic Development, Engagement, and Reflection*

We argue that universities must strongly defend their independent institutional status as critical incubators for intellectual life. Professor John Scott, a former vice-chancellor of La Trobe University, asserts that ‘It is time that governments recognised that universities are not just an expensive luxury, but a highly important part of our national activity.’ (cited in Polya, 2001). This supports Kumar’s proposition that universities allow us to reflect on things in a similar fashion to religious retreats.

3. *Versatility of Intellect*

We are constantly told by employers that the desired workforce is multi-skilled and flexible. We might well ask, as Bauman (1997) does, whether the skill preparation ‘required to practise flexible occupations does not, on the whole, demand long-term and systematic learning’. In fact, he suggests, often on-the-job training, short courses and weekend seminars can do as well (p. 23). By contrast, a liberal education might, in the words of Newman (1959) be ‘the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness, and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us’ (p. 12). As Newman goes on to point out, such attributes are ‘commonly ... not gained without much effort and the exercise of years’. This is another reason for rejecting the student as client-student “needs” approach to university education, for rigour often




meets understandable resistance by the neophytes of any new order. We are not arguing for a Gradgrindian, bleak, and remorseless learning; rather we see the joy of true achievement, articulated by Kumar: 'I want to see universities as bright and energetic students of all ages have experienced them at all times: as places to explore themselves with others, in speaking, writing, performing, playing, imagining, stretching themselves in mind and body' (1997, p. 32-33). These crucial roles of the university, we contend, contribute significantly to the development of the civil society.

The civil society is one defined by trust, mutuality, and reciprocity (Cox, 1995, p.29). Its characteristics are, then, that social relationships constitute society, rather than individuality (Cox, 1995, p.70). Education needs to prepare students for their roles within this society because it is a mistake to assume that students will leave university to become workers and nothing more. Students, both before and after they graduate are social beings: workers certainly, but also family members and citizens. Educational experience must prepare students to participate in the wider aspects of social interaction. In terms of the civil society, this means that, as Cox argues, individuals carry links with multiple communities within society through which 'breeds civic confidence and civic virtue' (Cox, 1995, p.30). Underpinning this is the notion of the '*viva activa*, or public life, in which we collectively create civil spheres' (Cox, 1995, p.7). The upshot of this collective focus is that the individual has both rights and responsibilities within a community. If education treats students as sovereign consumers whose rights are paramount, then it has failed to communicate that these same students also have responsibilities to both the scholarly community that imparts their education, and to the wider community.

Putting the case for a liberal education

Liberal Education

Liberal education, with its roots in Aristotle's notions of education, could be represented as an elitist activity available only to the leisured (male) classes such as those in Ancient Greece. However, if we adopt R.M. Hutchins' notion, then we can see the extension of liberal education as a vital element of the growth of democracy:



Democracy makes every man a ruler, for the heart of democracy is universal suffrage. If liberal education is the education that rulers ought to have, and this I say has never been denied, then every ruler, that is every citizen, should have a liberal education.


R.M. Hutchins, 1953, *The conflicts in education in a democratic society*, Harper, News York quoted in Eisner (1979) p. 56.

Indeed, this is politically emancipatory, aimed at empowering all men and women to reject tyrannies that impose ignorance and oppression on people. Yet it is also conservative in the sense that a liberal draws heavily on traditions and canons. For example, the conservative, Oakeshott (1971), who advocates liberal education, has described it as ‘a specific transaction, which may go on between the generations of human beings in which the newcomers to the scene are initiated into the world they are to inhabit’ (p. 43). The reward, he says, is emancipation ‘from the immediate contingencies of place and time of birth, from the tyranny of the moment’ (p. 74) – from the ephemera that so distract postmodernists and progressives.

Liberal education distinguishes itself from those pedagogies that provide skills aimed at satisfying current wants and satisfactions. Hirst’s (1972) notion of a liberal education is that it is purveyed ideally through forms of knowledge organised into ‘distinct disciplines’ (mathematics, history, physical sciences, etc.). A liberal education is concerned with the ‘comprehensive development of the mind’. According to Hirst, ‘whatever else a liberal education is, it is not a vocational education... not a specialist education in any sense’ (p. 1). A liberal education ‘quite deliberately’ excluded specialist concerns.

Vocational Universities

Universities have become vocationalized (Symes, 1999). That is, ‘ “working knowledge” is more than ever being academized through competency approaches to learning ... and are now offering more occupationally specific credentials’ (Symes &




McIntyre, 2000 p. 4). Although, as was argued above, universities have always been to some degree vocational institutions (eg, law and medicine), more recently the growth in knowledge-based employment, particularly service and financial sectors, has led to a greater need for vocational education (Boud & Symes, 2000, p. 17). This is a matter of conjecture, but not in this paper.⁷

There have been serious attempts to bridge this liberal-vocational divide. In the UK, there has been a substantial attempt to bridge this division (Lewis, 1994). He suggests that Hodgkinson's (1991) notion that academic and vocational learning lies on a continuum, not a binary, is a useful starting point. However, his proposed set of generic skills (example: self-awareness, self-confidence, problem-solving, communication, co-operation with others) is still infused with progressivist notions of selfhood being primary goals of education instead of cognitive and moral formation within a wider civic and academic purpose. Coffey (1989) argues that the new vocationalism in schools be understood far more liberally, by incorporating Dewey's social reconstructionist principles. According to Lewis, American vocationalists are far more radical. Shor (1988) asserts that schools should 'devotionalise' the thinking of students, and Rehm (1989) talks of an education that empowers students to 'transform themselves and the world with meaningful work' (p. 121).

Charles Bailey (1984) concurs that a liberal education 'stands in contrast to all kinds of vocational education'. It is not directed to any particular utility, but rather at 'liberation', 'fundamentality', 'generality' and 'intrinsically valued ends'. Perhaps the best-known U.S. example of a liberal university is The University of Chicago. One of its leading chancellors, Robert Maynard Hutchins, described liberal education as 'training in the liberal arts and of understanding the leading ideas that have animated mankind. It aims to help the human being learn to think for himself, to develop his highest human powers' (quoted in Eisner, p. 56). In contrast, the long-term usefulness of vocational education is less predictable. Kumar (1997) sums up by

⁷ It could be argued that, as a capital-importing nation, large sections of the Australian workforce are being dumbed-down. This is because many of the cognitive features of work are contained in the machine. Thus, the labour value of production is actually largely comprised by its overseas capital component that has used up the cognitive labour of overseas workers. If this is so, then perhaps one function of universities and higher school retention rates is to delay the increase in the industrial reserve army.



saying that ‘the cognitive and thinking skills involved, such as critical reasoning, were transferable across a variety of disparate fields, occupations and professions’ and that ‘the values epitomized in a liberal education formed the bedrock of Western civilization, outlasting more transient and ephemeral expressions of culture’ (p. 35).


The authors understand full well that this is squarely at odds with postmodernist pedagogy, and are happy to state our philosophical opposition to a paradigm that fails to produce an ethic capable of withstanding the massive inequalities and injustices that beset our contemporary times, that provides the logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1989, 1991), and whose de-canonising and anti-rationalist zeal provides no sensible basis for evaluating information or aesthetics.⁸

Anti-Progressivist

By liberal education we most certainly do not mean progressivist education. At the heart of progressivist education is the primacy of the individual and of personal meaning, manifested in notions of “personal relevance” and “personal needs”, and where firmly-held personal beliefs are considered equally valid as those that have institutional or historical support (cf. Neill, 1960; Holt, 1970). Such educational methods infused the curriculum of British, American, and Australian schools in the 1970s and 1980s with adverse consequences:

The attitude of superstitious reverence for childhood is still with us. The insistence that we must stick like a leech at all times to the “needs” of childhood has bred a spirit of anti-intellectualism, which is reflected in the reliance on improvising instead of long range organization, in the over-emphasis of the here and now ... and in the lack of continuity in the educational program
Boyd H. Bode (1938) in Eisner (1979), p. 60


⁸ Many postmodernists characterise canons as static bodies of knowledge or aesthetic selections. This is clearly not so. A liberal canon is an expanding, inclusive, and responsive one (vide Harold Bloom’s Western Canon). Furthermore, the humanities have generally never been resistant to indigenous, postcolonial, and feminist literature. The criticisms of many postmodernists, then, about the exclusivity of ‘high culture’ are weak indeed.



This criticism (see also McKenna, 1995) could be equally well directed at universities seeking to establish these centres of learning as client-oriented educational products. What we assert is that, while it is certainly sound educational practice to draw on the experiences of students (and this is increasingly hard to do when many of the students in the lectures and tutorials come from very different cultures and life experiences), it is inappropriate to base a curriculum around what students claim to be their “needs”. Indeed, this is entirely inappropriate for the reason that universities’ very role is to induct people into experiences that are not possible or likely elsewhere. Universities are repositories – not the sole repositories – of traditions of knowledge and thinking whose “quality control” is the academic process. These processes are the “portals” that should separate the dross from the worthwhile ore, and that have mechanisms that allow new phenomena to be analysed dispassionately, logically, and thoughtfully so that we can understand ourselves and our society better.

In fact, the respect should be coming from the student, not the university. By this we mean that when one enters a university, one enters a site that carries within its sandstone, red-brick, or prefab-concrete walls people who are ethically and collegially committed to their disciplines so that they can help to explain life and society, and thereby enhance our lives. They are also committed to passing on the very best a society has to offer for those who genuinely seek to know. Thus, paradoxically, while much of a university’s practice is with the here and now (whether it be collecting samples of river water, testing motor car engines, evaluating the lives of working mothers, or trying to understand the Eminem phenomenon), this practice is informed by an unfolding knowledge base, changing theories, and appropriate academic inquiry processes. These knowledges and processes are not easily acquired (which makes the notion of a one-year MBA ludicrous). Because the practices also involve reflection, they take considerable time for ideas to be worked over, critiqued, and refined. In this sense, we are saying that the university still has a legitimate age-old purpose of intellectual and subjective formation that takes time, discipline, and respect.

Our position also opposes what might be labelled instrumental progressivism, ‘which stresses a “student-centred style of education that is individualized and flexible, and



is designed to enhance the individual's opportunities for employment' (Symes & McIntyre, 2000, p. 2). It is progressivist in the sense that it is meant to respond to student 'needs' by concentrating on the ephemera by learning how to 'do' public relations or advertising or hospitality management, for example. In other words, students learn how to write advertising copy, or how to be customer-friendly at the very lowest levels of cognition (possession of information, comprehension, and application). It is instrumental in the sense that the outcomes are 'tethered to the goals of performativity' (p. 2).

The Enlightenment Project


In this sense, then, we unashamedly place ourselves in the line of the Enlightenment Project. We argue that the university, more than ever in an age of barbarism, has a vital and steadfast role in the civilising processes of a society worth living in and to be proud of. In particular, we identify three characteristics as vital elements of the Enlightenment Project. The role of the university in the enlightenment project means that we are committed to democratic processes, rational procedures of inquiry, and reason, tolerance and humanity.

1. Democratic processes

This notion of democracy is an affirmative egalitarian and optimistic one with a lineage stretching to Helvetius and Condorcet. Both these revolutionary philosophers see inequality as primarily resting in educational difference (Russell, 1961, pp. 693-696). Popularised also by Thomas Paine's notion of 'common sense', the belief is that access to learning would democratize society by releasing it from the yoke of ignorance and disguised ideology.

2. Rational procedures of inquiry to establish knowledge

Although initially the concern of science, the use of reasoning processes to establish shared knowledge also has a strong democratic element. Modern science is built upon a traditional method founded in empiricism and reason. The works of Locke, Newton, Boyle, Bacon, and the Royal Society was truly revolutionary because they established methods of free inquiry that unleashed 'the powers of human cognitive




activity from its domination and constraint by forms of arbitrary political authority' (Spragens, 2001, p. 56). Despite postmodernist attempts to denigrate this scientific tradition as being linear and exclusionary, over time it has built into its evolving processes an 'institutionalization of ... cognitive powers within the system of mutually corrective cooperative endeavor'. These remarkably adaptive processes allow for change in the processes themselves (eg, Popper, 1963, 1972; see also O'Hear, 1980 for critique of Popper; Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970; Lakatos, 1963-64) and even in the paradigms of knowledge (Kuhn, 1970)

This scientific process has been important in itself in releasing us from the burdens of ignorance and arbitrary authority. But, as Stephen Toulmin points out, 'Nothing in [the conception of rational human enterprise] limits the scope of disciplined enquiry to the natural sciences ... nor need the agreed goals or ideals ... be an explanatory one'⁹ (quoted in Spragens, 2001, p. 56). In other words, human enterprises (especially in rules of law and governance) and scientific enterprises benefit from 'a disciplined process of reasoning together'. Spragens argues that 'This large and pervasive insight is the single most important thing for us to salvage from the Enlightenment project and to carry with us into the twenty-first century'.

3. Reason, tolerance, and humanity

Again this draws on Condorcetian notions (Spragens, 2001), and, in the light of anti-imperialising theories (whose incorporation is made possible by Enlightenment principles) is reflexively sensitive to such smug binaries as "civilization / savagery". We argue that postmodern relativism has been a natural, but unbalanced outcome of the enlightenment project. However, extreme relativism needs to be corrected because it fails to produce worthwhile knowledge or codes of behaviour. Because liberal thought assumes that knowledge is tentative and evolving, and because it acknowledges that it is often culture specific, it has encouraged a sort of democracy of ideas. Unchecked, and inflected by postmodern relativism, this can lead to the notion that one idea is as good as any other, that there is no hierarchy of knowledge,

⁹ S. Toulmin (1972). *Human understanding*. Princeton, p. 359.




ideas, or aesthetics. This should be seen a dangerous and stupid approach. One wonders how such postmodernists rationalise the fact that they write this on a word processor built as a result of organised and predictable knowledge; or whether they would willingly accept 1901 dentistry when they visit their dentist in 2001; or whether they really believe that phrenology provides useful insights into anthropology. Far from taking a triumphalist, technocratic stance (indeed we are too well aware of our potential to create germ warfare, nuclear missiles, to salinate our rivers, and to destroy rainforests), we agree with Spragens (2001) in asserting that 'We need to work at sorting out in particular cases what are generalizable norms applicable to a whole range of peoples and societies and what are instead culturally specific patterns of aesthetic taste or adaptations to particular circumstances-in everything from religious affirmations to medical practices to gender relations to political institutions' (p. 57). Such a position is not new. Indeed Habermas's (1962/1989; see also Calhoun, 1992) 'public sphere' visualises such a democratic space and disposition.

A Proposed Curriculum

This returns this paper to the point at which we opened, the deficiencies exhibited by recent graduates. We have argued that students are not clients or customers, and that one ethic of education is to enable graduates to participate as members of the civil society. The final issue to address, then, is the means by which students can be inculcated with the problem-solving and critical thinking skills that will fulfil the twin aims of meeting employer requirements and broader, ethical concerns.

In determining a university curriculum, one should begin by asking, as Tyler's seminal *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* suggests: (1) what are the educational purposes that one seeks to attain?; (2) what educational experiences will be most likely to achieve those purposes; (3) how do educators best arrange educational experiences; and (4) how does one determine that these purposes are being attained? Our approach is unashamedly normative in that we espouse the creation of a particular type of graduate on the basis that we believe that the manifestation of certain values in graduate dispositions, knowledge, and skills are intrinsically good. Thus, we find ourselves immediately at odds with some major



features of postmodernism, namely the relativism of knowledge and ethics. We argue here that curriculum development could be usefully guided by Bloom et.al.'s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956) and Kohlberg's schema of Cognitive Moral Development. We understand that using such traditional and relatively crusty concepts will help to cement us in some people's minds as unreconstructed old fogeys; however, although we are aware of the extensive critique of these approaches¹⁰, we believe that they are still useful mechanisms to describe curriculum objectives.

Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's taxonomy categorises learning into six different levels, from the most straightforward (knowledge) to the most sophisticated (evaluation). The taxonomy is represented visually below

¹⁰ For example, the notion of Post-Conventional Moral Reasoning in Adulthood is widely discussed (Kohlberg, Levine & Hewer, 1983; Kohlberg & Armon, 1984; Alexander & Langer, 1990; Colby Kohlberg, Gibbs, & Lieberman, 1983; Bakken & Ellsworth, 1990).