

University Governance and Academic Work: the 'business model' and its impact on innovation and creativity

The Burton Clark Lecture 2019

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Diversity of institutions (1)

- **Russell Group university**

‘You can describe what we do as creating knowledge and disseminating knowledge. So that seems to me [that] the bedrock of what we do hasn't changed and won't change.’

- **Urban Post 1992 university**

‘The majority of our business is about students. We are not research intensive; students are at the heart of everything we do.’

Diversity of institutions (2)

- **Post-post-1992 university**

‘We are in the part of the market where we always have to be thinking about recruitment, applications, conversions, student numbers. That’s what drives our income. We do research but it’s on a very selective basis and financially it’s not that significant for us.’

- **For profit institution**

[The private equity owners’] strategy is that they invested a significant amount of money and they’ve done that via a fund and the fund has a fixed term, albeit there are ways to extend the term, but ultimately they want to exit and they want to exit on a massive multiple and make lots of money.’

Governing bodies and academic business

‘I’m seeing board members increasingly wanting to find out more and challenge more on the academic side, about quality for instance [and on] some of the metrics we use on a day to day basis as an executive, to measure our [institutional] performance’.

The effect of the cap (1)

- **Russell Group**

‘The academic priority ought to drive everything. We are not here to make money, we don’t have shareholders. We are here to do teaching, research and public engagement. That’s what we are here for. And all the other stuff is just the means by which we do it’.

The effect of the cap (2)

- **Post 1992**

‘You can have as many academic priorities as you might wish and all the things the university has prided itself on over the years but you can’t achieve any of those things without a real understanding of the current state of the market. That’s the life blood of the institution isn’t it? No recruitment, no institution’.

The academic autonomy of the individual teacher (1)

‘When I first started I had really a lot of autonomy about how many pieces of course work I wished to ask students to do. These days it is much more likely that there’ll be a university norm or there’ll be some kind of regulation about it: there are regulations about how many hours a programme is supposed to cover, so you have to work out, this much is lectures, this much is student work, this much is assessment’.

The academic autonomy of the individual teacher (2)

‘In the UK the system of [course] accreditation is incredible; the internal review process through the [institutional] quality assurance committee really is, you know, like the Stasi, at least at our university. It really discourages the faculty from making any changes [to a course] and then why should they [if it is so difficult]? For me I could never teach a module the same way twice. I always wanted to change things. It was a useful way to fold my research and my own intellectual journey in with the course’.

The academic autonomy of the individual teacher (3)

‘Until now [university x] has had a relatively benign bureaucratic environment in the sense that if you wanted to introduce a new programme, yes, there were internal blockages you had to get through but I haven't seen too many things blocked because of central bureaucratic or political issues or financial issues.... but this is changing I think with the more financial pressure you have, and the fact you have to run a School like a small business so [one] becomes almost a middle manager... with more financial pressure exercised from [central management]’.

Management control of academic processes

- **Comment from a Russell Group interviewee:**

‘I think there is still a lot of freedom on what to teach, what to do research on, but the type of outcomes which are acceptable have become more closely defined, more narrowly defined, and the processes are more scrutinised and managed, controlled, regulated so there is more surveillance, there is more management control’.

The student as customer (1)

‘If you’re now wanting us to start treating ourselves as consumers it’s kind of a Catch 22 situation.... I can either say treat us as consumers, give us the rights of consumers, but then I’m bowing down to the further marketisation of universities that all students fundamentally disagree with.... I don’t want that to be the reality we live in’.

The student as customer (2)

‘Students are consumers because the university is run by students — if students are not here staff are not here, so obviously they are consumers. They [the university] must look after these consumers. If they don’t they are going to change university, go to a different university. They [the university] are really going to lose students. In 2011-12 we had around 25,000 students, now we have 14,000’.

The impact of the REF (1)

‘[Targets] were all set at corporate level and at faculty level and at school level but they were brought down to an individual level. As a simple sort of disaggregation, if a school had a target of £x million that was simply divided by the number of staff in the school, taking account of position, and everyone was given an individual target. It was much too pressured without recognising the realities of individual performance’.

The impact of the REF (2)

‘I just feel we are constantlymaximising our research outputs and our league table standings at the expense of optimising what it is to be an academic’.

‘Academics are frightened for their jobs and they are scared to say, I don’t think this is right’.

The research environment

‘I’m not a romantic about blue skies research but the sense of freedom of us knowing better than [the funders] what the directions of travel in research ought to be, where the interesting questions are, what we don’t already know and the sense that we can pursue these and make policy proposals which are independent of what the customer wants, the customer being whichever government department it happens to be, that’s all come under a lot of pressure.... [It] is not so much that we only answer the questions which we are told to answer, it’s more like we are trying to guess what funders and policy-makers want to hear, making one feel like a kind of intellectual subordinate’.

The sense of exclusion (1)

‘I think there’s definitely decisions being taken at a level above the university which are linked to what are believed are market forces or.... broad economic trends which we, as academics, have no control over.... there’s a sense in which these things that we feel that we now have to be doing [as a service provider] and have to be implementing and have to be delivering to students because of the new context.... aren't something that as academics we decided to do or we decided would be a good thing for universities.... there’s a sense that there are people higher up the university who are making strategic decisions that are being driven by these broader forces.... so I think there is a sense of disempowerment’.

The sense of exclusion (2)

‘I think my perception is that higher education has become more business-like and that it is a more top-down system now rather than an academically driven system.... I think in the past academics have set the trajectory of the university, schools and departments within schools, for better or worse and now I think my perception is that certain roles that historically would have been led by academics have become led by administrative staff. I think my feeling is over the last six years there has been an erosion of the autonomy of academics’.

Discussion

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