THE DECLINE AND FALL OF UNIVERSITIES REVISITED

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Mark Tarver (Tarver, 2007) has not only made his point, he has put his money where his mouth is and left academic life. He paints a gloomy picture of trends in Universities in Western countries over the past thirty years or so as governments, intent on widening access, have imposed a counter productive system of accountability on lecturers and educational institutions. This, he says, created a 'cultural revolution' that ended up inflicting misery and 'degrading everybody involved'. What can be done to restore universities to their former glory?

Perhaps the first thing we should consider is that 'healing grace lies beyond the modern identity, not anterior to it' (Taylor, 1989). That is, we cannot go backwards. The second thing to note is that healing figures through out history have not dropped out of the system but stayed to transform it. (Although, those of us who are familiar with the modern education bureaucracy might be sympathetic with Tarver for leaving University life behind him; many times the battle seems to be too big for any individual). William Wilberforce (1759-1833) is our example; he began his opposition to the slave trade in 1797, gained a foothold with the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and lived long enough to see the Slavery Abolition Act passed in the English Parliament in 1833. So, let us be encouraged to ask again: what can be done about the current malaise in University education?

Access

Egalitarian notions are so much with us these days that it would appear impossible to reinstate the French notion that University life should be reserved for an elite upper class, or in modern parlance, an elite academic core group. But Taylor (op cit) sees the egalitarian project to have been degraded and in need of retrieval', a retrieval which is neither 'root and branch condemnation, uncritical praise nor a carefully balanced trade-off'.

There is strong support for the idea that the 21st Century needs a knowledge generation. Lawrence Chipman (2004) has argued that 95% of the populace in Australia could gain a university degree *given the right support*. Whether it would be advantageous for the bulk of the populace to study well into their early twenties is debatable but it is certain that a lot more people would undertake study towards a degree if they had the opportunity. The Paraclete Institute (Potter, 2005) has identified four classes of people who are currently disadvantaged by the way that universities operate, viz:

- People who have to work but would like to study in their own time and at their own pace at home.
- Home bound persons, including the physically challenged and mothers planning to return to the work place when their child- care responsibilities allow it.
- People who miss the cut due to bureaucratic control on student numbers.
- People who live in remote areas and cannot afford the cost of living in rented quarters in cities.

On this evidence, government attempts to widen the process have been flawed in that they have not devised a system that solves the problem of access for people who are currently disadvantaged by the traditional system of delivery. Thus, all that bureaucratic controls have engendered is an unnecessary paper war that has taken up the teachers' valuable time and rendered them less able to fulfill their obligations to their students.

The Education Relation

Morrow (1981) sees education proceeding via a teacher/student relationship. As Tarver reminds us, the earliest universities (Bologna and Paris) developed when interested persons gathered around a charismatic pedagogue (Boyd, 1961). There were no special buildings or lecture programs. Teachers and students gathered spontaneously and lived a common life filled with vibrant communication. The introduction of reporting and assessment by governments cut directly across this relationship. There is nothing further from the truth than the notion that pedagogic skill can be manufactured by incessant reporting to bureaucrats. Rather than improving performance, the paper war has gone a long way towards destroying it, as Tarver sadly reminds us. But will they ever learn? In 2008, the Australian government, wishing to impress the electorate, introduced an Education Revolution based on assessment of teachers and schools. Teachers are currently spending as much time on filling out forms as on teaching, with the inevitable result that they are either totally over-worked or taking short cuts in their teaching delivery. Standards are going down, not up as politicians predicted.

The truth is that modern universities have hardly ever placed importance on developing meaningful education relationships. In my undergraduate years in the 1950s I had something like 50 lecturers, none of whom were good communicators. There were only two with whom I developed any kind of relation and one of these only because we played cricket together; the rest never mixed with the student body. We were just numbers as far as they were concerned; they did not even know our names. The education relation was in sad disarray well before governments intervened in university education in the 1970s. In fact, it was the sad state of public university delivery that provided the excuse for bureaucrats to introduce government controls and assessment. Sadly, they did not see that quality was dependent on the education relation, not reporting.

Lectures or Tutorials?

In the 1950s I had a lecturer in geology who was so pathetic in his delivery that most of us took the notes supplied prior to the lecture, signed the attendance form and slipped away to the refectory for a morning coffee. We still passed that subject and this raises the point that lectures which are a one sided delivery of facts are neither helpful nor necessary. The facts can be put onto paper or, better still on the internet. What is needed is an education relation where the significance of the facts is explored in a congenial manner. This was the original idea behind tutorials. Students met in small groups with a mentor present to guide the discussion in a way that was helpful. Unfortunately, it became a trend for experienced academics to excuse themselves from taking part in tutorials. For the most part they handed the job over to post graduate students who, along with the students, treated tutorials lightly. In many cases they became a farce.

Some ten years after I first graduated I attended an Academic World Conference. Fifteen hundred delegates attended and many of whom presented papers. Most of the papers were trivial, the kind that Tarver says were '…contributory to global warming and deforestation' (op cit). Only three papers were of the kind that Tarver sees as 'important'. Notably, these three contributors presented a very few thoughts with a disarming simplicity of expression. But it was clear from the massive attendance at their lectures that the delegates knew that these thoughts were innovative and important. It is to such people that we all like to gather if we are given the opportunity - as in the old days in Bologna and Paris. We know what we want; even politicians and bureaucrats might sense it. The question is, how can tertiary education be organized to achieve it?

Towards a Better Model of University Education

So far I have argued that potential students need better access to university study programs and, once registered, given the opportunity to develop an education relation with a person of merit. I have also argued that the existing lecture system is not conducive to learning; it is one sided affair and the evidence is that very few students can construct knowledge in such an environment.

The University of South Africa (UNISA) was the first to develop a fully distance learning program of delivery in 1946. Today it delivers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs to 270 000 students in sixty (60) countries. More recently the Open University in the UK has operated a successful program of delivery that incorporated good quality of materials and tutorial opportunities. And the All India University has eclipsed them all, currently servicing five (5) million students. All distance programs are modular. All are open to students who have the right pre-requisite education qualifications and can pay the moderate fees[1]. Students can study in their own time and at their own pace. The 'facts' are presented in high quality hard-copy materials, recommended text books and, more often these days, via the internet. The success rate of this model is now well established and it is surprising that all universities have not moved to adopt it.

Resistance to Change

In 2000, the Paraclete Institute signed an agency agreement with the University of South Africa which allowed it to deliver UNISA degrees in Australia. UNISA is listed on the Commonwealth List and the UNESCO list and accredited by the World Body on Distance Education, Washington DC. Further, Australian education authorities list UNISA degrees as equivalent to any earned at an Australian university. UNISA was already delivering its proven course to Australian citizens without the assistance of the Paraclete Institute but it saw the advantages of having a local organization doing the marketing and providing a local tutorial service.

The Institute was successful in gathering together a large number of tutors who were prepared to *visit groups of students*, where they lived (as opposed to asking students to attend City campuses), to assist them in their learning. Special tutors were appointed to assist students to develop good study habits in their first year of study. With every thing in order, the Institute set about registering to deliver tertiary education in Australia. It ran into a wall of resistance from the bureaucracy that lasted and in 2006, after seven years of battling, finally accepted that there was no way through to registration. It seemed that the bureaucrats, rather than implement government policy towards greater openness and success, preferred to act as defenders of the established system. Sadly, twenty thousand persons in South Australia, who wished to study for a degree, are still excluded from the process.

Some people have looked to the establishment of Private Universities as an option for those wishing to develop a better model of tertiary education. They too have faced 'impossible' resistance from the establishment but like Wilberforce have found this not a reason to abandon the project. They have been encouraged to hold to the idea that there is a way forward. Dale (1989) says that we must work in the contradictions. What this means still has to be demonstrated but persistent effort by people like Dr David Le Cornu of the St Clements University encourage us that those of us who look for a better model can and will win through in the West. But what about Universities in developing nations, what are the problems they face?

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The Decline and Fall of Universities in Developing Nations

In the post Second World War years, European

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[1] The cost of delivering courses by distance means is massively cheaper than traditional systems.

colonial governments gave way to a mounting call for national independence. One of the things that newly independent countries wanted to establish their legitimacy was national universities, and their colonial masters were helpful in meeting this objective. For instance, the British Overseas Development Ministry (ODM) provided assistance to the British African ex-colonies and protectorates in the form of money for campus buildings and the provision and payment of foundational lecturing staff from the UK. African students were registered and some of those who graduated went on scholarships to the UK and USA to complete post graduate study. When they returned to Africa with PhDs they began to replace ex-patriate staff; a period known as 'localisation' had begun. Eventually all foreign staff members were replaced and the ODM patted the Independent State government on the back, congratulated them that they now had a truly indigenous university and left with due pomp and ceremony. Whether the British Government anticipated it or not is uncertain but the result was that the National Universities substantially collapsed when their aid supply was cancelled.

The reason for this was that during the establishment phase the local government had contributed not a penny to the cost of buildings and equipment or staff salaries, and students had paid no fees. That is, there was no income apart from aid so, when the aid was withdrawn, the system was unsustainable. There was some attempt to keep up appearances. Some staff members were retained and paid insignificant salaries but services could not be provided. On one occasion the author arrived at a national university as a visiting lecturer only to find the power had been switched off. His host informed him that the university owed the local electricity company $US 500 000 and had no way of paying it! The problem remains today that many African governments have no way of financially supporting a national university and the students, being mostly impoverished, have no way of paying fees.

At the present time it is difficult to know how higher education in such countries can be rescued, especially as lack of finance is not the only problem they face. Political power struggles, high levels of corruption, wars, famine and pestilence all operate against the stable management of education services. In Africa, the AIDS pandemic has had a profound impact on educational development. One country known to the author lost fifteen thousand teachers to AIDS between 1996 and 2003; in the latter year, the Ministry of Education was supplying seventy five coffins to schools each week to bury deceased teachers. The question remains: in consideration of their general impoverishment and other factors, how can developing nations maintain higher education services, especially as most students are unable to pay even moderate levels of fees?

New Tertiary Models for Difficult Situations

It is clear that developing nations need educated

people; local universities must be helped to survive if national developmental objectives are to be achieved. Two things must happen. Firstly, some financial aid will be required to get any new system of education up and running. Secondly, the local economy must be improved to provide hope of sustainability.

There is nothing new in this. On paper at least these have been the objectives ever since countries became independent. But there needs to be some changes. In the past, aid has always been tied to hidden commitments, e.g. all ex-British colonies were tied to a British Trade Preference at independence; as far as can be ascertained this still applies. What this means is that all purchases by governments must go through an agent in London who charges two or three times the price for goods compared with the market place.

Aid has never come cheaply. Aid donors have always required that donations be re-paid with interest. Aid is big business, especially for donors! If we are to see progress in the establishment of a permanent system of higher education in the developing two-thirds world, donors will have to provide start-up funds for economically viable projects rather than provide cash handouts. This suggests that the two requirements outlined above may be brought together into joint-venture projects that have hope of financial success. Developing nations have assets; the problem is that they are not always utilized to useful purpose. And that is not necessarily the fault of officials in developing governments, although they must take some portion of the blame, either from ignorance or corrupt practices or both.

Assuming that the resources needed to get universities in developing countries operating at a good level are available, the next step is to establish a model of education that has the right curriculum and is efficient in delivery.

The Curriculum

The general practice in Africa and developing countries around the world has been to adopt a European curriculum with little thought of the consequences. It is the qualification that is important, not course content. In South Africa, Duminy has reported how rural African students have been asked to answer questions about 'tennis racquets' and 'mantle-pieces', things with which they are unfamiliar (Duminy 1967). And this raises the point that African people have seldom if ever been asked to consider what should be in the curriculum for their formal education[2].

If higher education in the developing world is a problem, then we should adopt a problem solving model for solving it. It is generally agreed that problem solving is a social exercise that begins by helping people think about what they are dissatisfied with, what they wish to change and what they think they can do to bring about change. There are numerous change models in the literature; one of the

best is that developed by Batten (1967). And, thanks to the social science re-think in the 1960s, there are now numerous reports of case studies where change has been successfully implemented by local action groups as opposed to bringing in experts (e.g. Virone, 1963). The key in all cases has been to use an introductory strategy that successfully *involves* the target group in the process and thereby *motivates* them to think about solving their problems for themselves; e.g. the 'Problem Census' (Potter, 1997).

Involvement is of itself motivational. Experience shows that members of new and even artificial groups can be motivated by an appropriate involvement strategy to participate strongly in later stages of the problem solving process. See Blencowe, et al (1974).

The procedures for getting key personnel in developing nations to think seriously about the curriculum are available. The first action required to re-instate higher education is to form a **working group** that will identify and refine a genuine local curriculum on a continuing basis. There is no necessity for universities in developing countries to conform to the standards and curriculum of the old world, although it is taken for granted that the lessons of the established universities will not be necessarily ignored. What is critical is that the curriculum meets the needs of the nation, not that it meets the demands of the 'Canon' or the requirements of the Commonwealth list. Once the national education needs are defined it is a short step to build courses or find existing courses that fit the bill.

Teaching

As mentioned above, HIV/AIDS has taken out a large number of trained teachers in Africa, and other nations like Indonesia and Papua New Guinea are now experiencing the same problem. In Africa, the effect has been felt greatest amongst staff of tertiary institutions because of the limited number of people with the right qualifications and the habit of salaried people in such countries to pursue a promiscuous lifestyle. There is a massive shortage of indigenous university lecturers in most countries currently.

One way of overcoming this problem might be to consolidate the curriculum and use the internet or DVDs to dispense it. Courses could be placed on a web-page and if lecturers are thought to be required, outstanding teachers could be engaged to record lectures for general distribution on disc or via the internet. With this backing, students could study in private or, in the best case scenario, attend tutorials run by relatively inexperienced personnel. The University of South Africa, the Open University and many other similar institutions have demonstrated beyond any doubt that examinations for students studying under these conditions are simple enough to organize. Admittedly the above proposal does not provide the crucial teacher/student educational relation but that is a luxury that Western Universities have long since abandoned so the lack of it should not necessarily retard education in the third world. In the longer term a national tutorial system would be a great advantage. There are professional people located in most areas that can be called upon to assist the program.

Mentoring

The value of the distance learning model is that people can work at the same time as they are studying. This solves two problems: (1) they or their employer can pay the study fees; and (2): supervisors in the work place can act as mentors, not only guiding the employees performance in the job to hand, but to take a direct interest in the employee's on-going study program. This arrangement would allow the crucial teacher/student relation to be transported from the educational institution to the work place – an idea that seems to have a great deal of all round merit.

CONCLUSIONS

For historical reason, the problems faced by Western Universities differ from the problems facing universities in the developing world. In the West, universities must conform to government regulations if they are to remain registered to deliver higher education. And registration is important if universities wish to enroll international students – immigration permits are not offered to students wishing to study at non-registered institutions. The immediate problem for Western universities outlined by Tarver (op cit) is how to maintain standards in the face of government requirements that insist on greater access and impose a counter-productive assessment process on lecturers and university administrators. The result is that university staff members are overloaded and something has to give. Regrettably, according to Tarver (op cit) the thing that suffers is the quality of teaching and job satisfaction for the lecturing staff.

In developing countries the problem is the inability of national governments to supply sufficient qualified staff and to maintain facilities and salaries in the light of the students' inability to pay fees. They need a simple system of delivery that can overcome these deficiencies.

It appears that the problems of universities in both Western and developing countries could be synthesized to a similar response, viz:

- The curriculum and specific course content could be developed by the on-going referencing of informed persons **in the work place**. This is not necessarily a replacement of human capital theory by crass credentialism (Blaug, 1970); it is a way of identifying and meeting genuine educational needs.

- Course content could be consolidated into hard copy (text books). or better still, provided on DVDs or via the internet.

- Highly experienced lecturers could be hired to prepare video lecture series for dissemination.

- Distance learning materials that guid the student's progress could be prepared for each subject/module. Again, these can be placed on the internet.

- Institutions could hire tutors with teaching qualifications to assist students with study methods as well as open up the course content. Tutors should **travel to the students,** rather than students traveling to the institution. Tutorial centres should be selected on the basis of their convenience to a group of students, not the convenience of the tutor. This would not only allow a savings in costs to the student but reduces the need for institutional buildings and other facilities.

- Examinations can be organized at centres convenient to the student body. There is no lack of examination invigilators – local school teachers or business people can provide this service.

- Employers could encourage mentoring relationships within their operations, not only to ensure that employees performance is adequate and their personal needs met but to ensure they have the assistance the need to do well in their studies – a result of equal importance to the employer as to the student.

In the present technological age, none of the above suggestions should be difficult to implement. In Africa, and other countries where there is a shortage of school teachers, these principles could be extended to secondary schools under the supervision of minimal staff. But that is another story.

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