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Realizing Higher Education after Dearing

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Introduction

The terms of reference of the UK's recent Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Sir Ron (later Lord) Dearing included the injunction that it should make regard to how higher education should develop 'over the next 20 years' (NCIHE, 1997, p3). The Committee's ensuing Report, indeed pointed out that it was 'appointed to advise on the long term development of higher education' and the Chair, in the cover letter to the foreword, was at pains to express the Committee's concern that 'the long term wellbeing of higher education should not be damaged by the needs of the short-term'.

In other words, the Committee was charged to envisage the character of the UK higher education system as it might look well into the twenty-first century and it also accepted this challenge. A remit of this kind prompts two kinds of question. The first question might be: did the Committee meet the challenge by in fact sketching out a picture of higher education at a point well into the future? Such a question, however, begs a second question: how feasible is the task of imagining the character of a higher education system at some distant future date?

In this paper, I shall address both questions but shall, in the first place, be concerned with the second of those questions which I take to be the prior question. If we determine that the feasibility of trying to construct a picture of a future higher education system is in doubt, that would in turn colour the response that we would give to the first

question. At best, we could say that the Committee tried but that its task was forlorn. That, indeed, is the twin argument that I shall make, in responding to those two questions: in being asked to look into the future, the Committee was being given a remit that never could be brought off. Its Report, accordingly, should be seen not as a unitary vision of the future but as a contemporary statement representing the outcome of a negotiation between present interests.

An age of supercomplexity

We live in an age of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000). A situation of complexity exists, we might say, when the immediate demands - the number of clients to be seen, the number of messages to be answered, the number of actions to be taken - exceed the resources available to meet those demands. This is the situation in which priorities have to be set very quickly, in which decisions have to be made without full information, and in which time afforded to clients may not match the challenge of the individual case. Higher education, we may note en passant, is being urged to develop among its student so-called 'complexity skills': I take these to be precisely the skills required to cope with such situations of complexity.

Whether or not 'complexity skills' of this kind exist, the situations of complexity that they are supposed to address are familiar enough. In higher education, they are evident in the sheer number of students to teach, their essays to be read, the emails to be answered, the commitments entered into to produce papers by a certain date, and the expectations placed on one to apply for that research grant, even while the current project is still under way. The demands such multiple challenges present are real enough and give rise to professional challenges of handling multiple challenges within a context of limited time, resource and money.

However, alongside this situation of complexity, there is also present in contemporary life a situation - as I term it - of supercomplexity. A world of supercomplexity is characterised by a multiplicity of the frameworks through which we make sense of our world. Under conditions of supercomplexity, who we are, how we relate to each other, how we relate to the world around us, what values we might entertain and what

responsibilities we might have towards each other and to the wider society: all these are matters of dispute. It is a world of radical contestation. It is a world in which we are saturated with contending frameworks for understanding as such.

Since it is a general phenomenon, supercomplexity affects higher education. Are we to understand higher education as part of the economic productive capacity of society, playing its part in enabling the host society to compete in the global economy? Are we to understand higher education as imparting those human qualities that are associated with a propensity in favour of learning itself, such that the learning society itself is brought more fully into being? Are we to understand higher education as an arm of social policy, engaged in widening life chances, enhancing the 'inclusive society'? Are we to understand higher education as a means of personal fulfilment? Or are we even to understand higher education as playing its part in providing 'the conscience of the nation' (NCIHE, 1997, 5.40)?

There are, then, at least five separate themes in the Committee's Report:
 the global economy;
 social inclusivity;
 the learning society;
 personal fulfilment;
 societal critique.

Identifying themes of this kind in the Committee's Report raises three kinds of question. Firstly, their separate treatment within the Report: how fully and how consistently is each theme followed through? Secondly, the likelihood of their realization: how effective are the Committee's recommendations likely to do justice to each theme? Thirdly, their interrelationships: are they internally consistent? Or do they conflict with each other?

In this paper, I want to concentrate attention on the third of these questions. That question, that of internal consistency, may seem the least immediate of the three, being a matter of analysis rather than of practical judgement. I contend to the contrary: this matter of internal consistency is the prior question, since it frames the other two. If it turns out that the themes are inconsistent, then the likelihood of their all being fully

realized both in the Report and beyond it will be lessened.

A brief comment, however, on the first of those issues, the extent to which each theme is explicitly in evidence through the Report, is appropriate. Of the five, the first, that of the global economy, runs throughout the Report. The second, that of the learning society, is given some attention near the beginning of the Report but, thereafter, hardly at all; and this, despite the title of the Report being that of Higher Education in the Learning Society. The third and fourth themes, those of inclusivity and personal fulfilment are barely in evidence as explicit matters in the body of the Report: it would be a matter for separate examination as to whether in fact, the Committee's recommendations, say, on the financing of higher education are likely to improve its social inclusivity or its recommendations on, say, the development of the professionalism of academics as teachers are likely to prompt a pedagogical process that made each student's personal fulfilment more likely. What can be said here is that such larger considerations are barely, if at all, evident in the shaping of the particular recommendations. So far as the last of those five themes is concerned, that of higher education as a means of advancing the critical conscience of society, it can fairly be said that the theme, once raised (in chapter five) is left at that point.

The key themes in the Report, we may judge, receive differential treatment. Receiving most attention and, indeed, central to the Report is the theme of economic production and the contribution that higher education might make to it; in contrast, the others receive walk-on parts at best, with the role of higher education as a form of societal critique being more than waiting in the wings.

We may understand the Report, accordingly, as a text in which a number of themes are intertwined, each having a greater or a lesser strength. The presence of the themes is not happenstance but is a consequence both of the interests represented among the members of the Committee and the terms of reference and general framework imposed upon the Committee by the state in its setting-up. (The establishment of the Committee had cross-party support.) Among the members of the Committee were several representatives of industry and commerce, especially of the new industries, including pharmaceuticals, electronics and retailing. There were also senior representatives of the academic community. The playing out of the key themes and concerns of the

Committee can, therefore, be seen as a negotiation between the dominant interests present in the work of the Committee, especially those of the state, industry and commerce, and senior management within academe.

Given the composition of the Committee, it is hardly surprising that certain themes were relatively weakly pursued in the Report or, indeed, were entirely silent. Missing, for example, is any serious treatment of the curriculum; and, yet, the curriculum lies at the heart of higher education. Missing, too, is an examination of the student experience. The student voice was, after all, barely represented in the Committee, there being just one student representative among a number of manifestly powerful voices. But missing, too, were voices representative of certain sectors of the 'world of work'. For example, there were no voices representative of the professions; and yet many graduates will gain careers in the professions. Accordingly, the themes, and their balance and their force, that are to be found in the Committee's Report, are not only skewed among themselves; they are but a selection of the possible themes that might have been present and seriously pursued (cf. Parry, 1999) .

A vision for the future?

Within the playing out of its concerns, within the separate themes that gave some kind of structure to its deliberations, was there a single and coherent set of ideas that characterized the Committee's sense of higher education? Did it portray a unified vision of the future? Is the Committee's Report likely to be remembered - as the Robbins' report before it - for a unity of view about higher education?

Here, we are returned to one of our earlier questions: how are we understand the internal relationship between the different key themes? It has been suggested by Watson and Taylor that there is, indeed, a unity of view, a vision that is contained in the Report, a vision built around the idea of a learning society (Watson and Taylor, 1998). There are two difficulties with this proposition. Firstly, as noted, despite its title, there is no serious exposition in the Report as to its conception of the learning society; nor, as a result, is there a clear sense as to how the Committee's recommendations are to aid the role of higher education in bringing about a learning society (Barnett, 1998). Secondly, even if we accept that at least the idea of a learning society figures as

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a strong theme in the Report, it is not clear how it relates to what is undoubtedly a strong theme, that of the global economy and the part to be played by higher education within it.

It may be said that the there is no tension between the two themes and that they are, indeed, complementary to each other. However, the interpretations given by the Committee to the challenges posed to higher education by the global economy and the learning society on the one hand, and their interrelationships on the other hand, have to be matters for analysis and interpretation. It could be that the Committee's treatment of the two issues are in conflict with each other. For example, the emphasis that the Committee places on the development among students of skills raises difficulties in relation to both themes. The skills that are listed - some of them, at least - may contribute to neither a response to the global economy nor to the learning society, or may contribute to just one of those possible roles.

My focus here, it will be recalled, is that of vision. I am suggesting that, despite its self-understanding, there is no unequivocal and unitary vision to be uncovered in the Dearing Report. It is true that the Report sets out, virtually at the start, what it terms 'a vision for higher education' (NCIHE, 1997, 1.4). There, we see juxtaposed the themes of economic success and the learning society. We also see other themes of learning as such, standards and community support. A little further on, we see in a section on the learning society immediate and repeated references to the global economy and to economic success. In other words, the learning society is defined in terms of the response to the global economy that it might bring. The learning society is barely considered as a matter of interest in its own right in setting out a view of the future role of higher education.

There are, therefore, two immediate readings of the vision for higher education contained in the Dearing Report. A first reading is that there are a large number of disparate visions of higher education contained in the one Report. Some of these visions are barely advanced; others are well advanced. The extent to which these disparate visions resonate with or pull against each other is not examined. The Report, accordingly, is a patchwork of different visions. A second reading is that the theme of the global economy is overriding: either other themes, once raised, are neglected or are interpreted

in terms of the contribution that they might offer to the UK's response to the global economy.

Vision in an age of supercomplexity

At this point, I want to return to the idea of supercomplexity that I raised earlier. My argument is that, in part due to globalization (although only in part), the world is saturated with contending frameworks of interpretation. Far from large stories disappearing, as the postmodernists want to believe, they are in fact increasing. We are besieged by multiple possibilities through which to understand ourselves, our institutions and our social projects. However, the postmodernists are also awry in another sense: strong postmodernism also wishes to claim that all our cognitive options are completely open. This is false. We live in a world that is dominated by certain interests, even if the contending voices are both multiplying and are being accorded increasing space.

This, indeed, is what we see in the Dearing Report: multiple and contending frameworks of understanding but played out in an arena in which some forces - especially those representative of large players in the emerging economy - are especially influential. In turn, some voices are relatively quiescent and yet other voices are silent, being entirely excluded from the debate.

'Vision', therefore, turns out - in a democracy - to be the outcome of a negotiation between the voices permitted to contribute to a debate. Inevitably, such a debate bears an outcome in which the emerging story is both a conglomerate of different stories, albeit weighted in certain directions and which speak to a sense of the world as currently perceived by the contending parties.

In other words, there is a difficulty about building in a strong sense of the future into Reports of this kind. It is noticeable that, despite looking to chart a higher education system well into the twenty-first century, there are no scenarios set out as that might convey alternative visions at some point in the future. For example, there is no attempt made to chart the possible impact of globalization upon the character of universities:

what might global universities look like in the year 2020? What might global networks of universities be like? What impact are corporate universities likely to have upon current mainstream universities?

Such questions barely begin to scratch the surface of the ideas of the university now beginning to appear. 'The virtual university'; 'The entrepreneurial university'; 'The distributed university'; a university characterized by 'excellence'; 'The learning university': these are yet other visions of the university for the twenty-first century.

The ideas of the university and the form it might take: such visions seem to grow and grow. This proliferation of frameworks through which we might understand the university is not just a chance happening: it is entirely what we should expect in an age of supercomplexity. Under conditions of supercomplexity, it will be recalled, our frameworks by which we comprehend the world and its features go on multiplying.

Realizing the university in an age of supercomplexity

I have been suggesting that we are awash with multiple ideas of the university. There is no single large idea available to us. This situation is likely to be exacerbated, not just because the government - in the UK and elsewhere - chooses to pursue a policy of diversity but because the age of supercomplexity in which we find ourselves has precisely that character. Under conditions of supercomplexity, the ways open to us to interpret our situation, to frame our projects and to orient our institutions: all these undergo a process of multiplication even if, as we have seen, in the process, some definitions are more favoured than others.

As a result of this cognitive proliferation, we are saddled with two challenges. Firstly, in a changing world, it becomes increasingly difficult to anticipate the future. Secondly, if we are honest, we would admit not just that we are confronted with more ideas of the university than we can handle but that those ideas sometimes conflict with each other. It is not clear that a university intent on marketing itself under the banner of 'excellence' can easily pursue vigorously a highly open admissions policy; it is not clear that a university that seriously accepted that it was to contribute to 'the conscience of a democratic society' can also pursue and accept whatever funding comes its way,

for example for research for private sector corporations that carries with it restrictions on publication.

It will be said that there is no difficulty here. As indicated, the state should promote a diverse system of higher education in which each university is encouraged to develop its own mission which, in turn, should be subjected to market forces. Since there is no single idea of the university, it would be right not to impose any requirements on universities: multiple ideas of the university will be best encouraged through a policy of 'diversity'.

As a matter of fact, we may note that no government is prepared to allow such a situation. Considerations of accountability, of the responsiveness of universities to the dominant agenda of global competitiveness and of social equity prompt governments to retain a considerable degree of influence on universities. Accordingly, most higher education systems adopt a position of a mixed economy between the market and state regulation.

My concerns, here, however are different. There are two issues. Firstly, can we any longer speak of the responsibility of the university in an age of supercomplexity? Are there any general responsibilities that any longer attach to the name of 'university'? Secondly, what does it mean in practice for a university to be operating under conditions of supercomplexity? Are there any principles that might frame its style of leadership, its curricula and its research?

Responsibility

On the first matter, if we are to speak of responsibility in an age of supercomplexity, in an age where all of our frames of reference and our values are contested, then our sense of responsibility has to derive from a recognition of the presence of supercomplexity itself. Three sets of responsibilities flow from this reflection:

i　　In an age of supercomplexity, the university has a responsibility to go on contributing to the expansion of our frames of understanding. Particularly against the

background of a global economy and also globalization more generally, innovation is happening in any case. In this milieu, the university has a particular responsibility to compound this expansion of our experience of the world by playing its part in expanding our frames of interpretation and of action. The world requires just this of our universities: that they constitute themselves as social institutions that are producing new frameworks of understanding, helping us to see and do new things in the world. In this way, the university is only making more complex the supercomplexity that it has already helped to bring about.

ii   Secondly, in an age of supercomplexity, the university has a new responsibility, that of helping us to live with supercomplexity. The level of suicide and the degree of mid-career burn-out among professionals are both increasing: arguably, these are indicators of an inability to cope with supercomplexity. The multiplicity of frames of understanding and of action, the infinite variety and contestation that daily assaults us, becomes literally too much to handle. The university, accordingly, is confronted with the task of ameliorating the cognitive and experiential overload that supercomplexity presents. The university has helped to bring about supercomplexity; in that case, let it then help us to cope with the very situation that it has helped to create.

iii   Lastly, an age of supercomplexity requires of us that we not only look upon it with equanimity but that we also have the capacity to act purposefully within it. In a world of incessant change, and of multiple stories of our situation and of rival value systems working themselves out, there can be no stable resting place. Either one keeps up with the flow or one falls out of the world altogether. The university is, therefore, faced with this additional challenge: that of imparting the capacities for making effective interventions in the world, when there can be no determinate way of judging our actions in it. This is a new form of practical wisdom, in which it is acknowledged at the outset that there can be no final arbiters.

Realizing the university

What, if anything, flows from this depiction of the University in an age of supercomplexity? How do these responsibilities play themselves out? If the university

is both faced with incessant change and contestation and is helping to contribute to that change and contestation in society more generally, what is it to realize the University under these conditions?　Challenges present themselves in relation to institutional leadership, research and teaching.

Institutional leadership

The institutional leader who agrees with my argument so far might be tempted to say: if all is in flux, if nothing is certain and if everything is challengeable, then the best stance for the university leader is that of standing well back and keeping a benevolent eye on proceedings.　The university has a dynamic of its own: on what basis could there be any intervention, other than to ensure that the university remains solvent and that its activities are conducted according to due standards? In this conception, university leadership takes on a mainly ceremonial function, helping to maintain peace and harmony within and to project the university to the wider world.

This is a plausible reading of university leadership in an age of supercomplexity.　But it would represent an abandonment of the role and would not serve the university in such an environment.　It may be that planning and institutional vision become difficult in an age of supercomplexity but other possibilities loom into view.

The first requirement is that the university should be well positioned epistemologically. By this, I mean that its total intellectual capital is well-marshalled, with as many links between the different disciplines as possible.　By and large, disciplines are well insulated from each other: academics would rather speak to others in their own discipline on the other side of the world before they speak to those in other disciplines in the same university (Becher, 1989).　But, precisely because, in an age of supercomplexity, we can never tell what intellectual challenge or opportunity might come the way of the university, a role now falls on the leadership to encourage cross-departmental links, joint projects, and collaboration between academics in different disciplines.

In order to fulfil this responsibility, a further requirement arises.　Collaboration and communication cannot be encouraged at any serious level unless there is a prior understanding of the existing intellectual capital within the university.　What is

astonishing is that universities know very little systematically about their most valued resource, the intellectual and professional capital that their staff possess. The leadership should, therefore, put in hand an intellectual and professional audit of each member of staff so that there is a systematic inventory of the intellectual territory and skills that each individual possesses. Such an inventory should be regularly maintained and made available to every member of staff so that it, too, can aid interaction between them.

In these ways, through bringing about communication and through encouraging collaboration, the university's leadership can hope to maximise the intellectual energy and frames of thinking and of action that lie deep within the university itself. With its internal intellectual energy mobilised in this way, with criss-crossings of interaction, dialogue and mutual understandings, the university will be well placed not just to withstand the supercomplex environment that surrounds it but will be able to make its own effective interventions in that environment.

Research

Under conditions of supercomplexity, research has two responsibilities. Firstly, it has the task of producing striking new ideas, new ways of looking at the world. In other words, it has the task of generating new frameworks of understanding, and thereby compounding supercomplexity. Secondly, it has the task of projecting those innovative frameworks to the widest possible audiences. Let us look briefly at each of these tasks.

On the first one, that of generating striking new ideas and frameworks, it will be said that there is nothing new here; that this has long been the role of research. The response is understandable, for that is how research likes to project itself; such a self-projection is, however, misleading. For the most part, so-called research is simply a matter of filling in the mortar in a building that is already constructed; at most, especially in the humanities and social sciences, it takes the form of knocking down the building; of deconstructing it. Research is normally small-scale epistemologically speaking, and is piecemeal and endorsing in character: it affirms what is already known. Under conditions of supercomplexity, however, what is called for from our researchers are bold formulations, imaginative ideas and daring new frameworks (Popper, 1963).

Researchers can no longer feel that they are fulfilling their responsibilities just by being professional in their work. Under conditions of supercomplexity, in a world that is in any case subject to rapid change and incessant dispute, research becomes a matter of adding to that state of affairs.

But, to turn to the other responsibility, particularly under conditions of supercomplexity, there is no point in producing significant additions to our frames of knowing if no one or hardly anyone knows about them. In this new age, the university is faced not just with the challenge of interacting with the world but with the challenge of bringing about the widest comprehension of the new frameworks that it has produced. In turn, this means that researchers have to be become public communicators, able and willing to disseminate their thinking to multiple audiences in the very different media and forms of communication that will resonate with those different audiences.

Researchers like to work in narrow frames of reference, endorsing contemporary understandings and speaking to other researchers. All this has to change, with researchers understanding that a world of supercomplexity requires much more from them. In an age of supercomplexity, research has to take on a pedagogical function in relation to the rest of society.

Teaching

For two hundred years, the University has gained its legitimacy through its discovery and promulgation of knowledge. Teaching became the pedagogical adjunct of research: it was the forum in which academics passed on the fruits of their labours as researchers. But, under conditions of supercomplexity, teaching becomes problematic if only because knowledge itself becomes problematic. Amid supercomplexity, the pedagogical challenge is not one of knowledge but of being. It is a matter of developing in individuals the dispositions and qualities that are appropriate to supercomplexity. These dispositions and qualities include those of:

courage;
resilience;
a willingness to engage with one's environment;

careful listening, to pick up what the wider world is saying;

the capacity to encounter and to respond to newness.

These are personal qualities and they call for a pedagogical relationship that itself has certain characteristics. For example, it should accord the student:

a range of different experiences, calling for thought, action and a sense of oneself;

considerable pedagogical space to develop her own thinking;

confidence to venture her own thoughts;

respect as a person;

encouragement to engage with other students;

the chance to make mistakes in an environment free of undue anxiety.

This is a pedagogical environment characterized by risk, but where the student is enabled to develop the human qualities appropriate not just to surviving but to making her own purposive interventions in that environment. It would present challenges not just to the students but also, and more importantly, to the lecturers themselves. For it would require that they discharge their responsibilities towards their students in quite new ways. The role of lecturer as an authority within a discipline has to give way to that of an educationalist interested in promoting the wider personal qualities that supercomplexity calls for.

Lecturers will not readily widen their responsibilities in this way. In the first place, they will fear a loss of authority: in this pedagogy, their authority has to be made and remade continually. Secondly, they will fear a loss of security, since a pedagogy for supercomplexity has to contain elements of risk and open-endness (cf, Beck, 1992). Thirdly, they will sense that their educational challenges are multiplying; indeed, that they are having to take seriously for the first time their responsibilities as educators. Lecturers are liable, therefore, to shrink from this conception of their role.

Conclusion

It is hardly surprising that the Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in the UK

was unable to emerge with a unified vision of higher education. We live in an emerging age of supercomplexity, an age in which we are confronted with multiple conceptions, values and frameworks for interpreting ourselves and the world around us. The expectation on the part of the Committee that it might produce such a unified vision was over-optimistic. The price of its hope that it might so emerge with a unified vision was threefold: firstly, it did scant justice to certain views that it did raise (for example, that higher education might play its share in forming the critical conscience of society, or that it might develop among students practical wisdom); secondly, it tried to produce something of a single view around the joint themes of globalization and lifelong learning but left unaddressed their relationship to each other; and lastly, the Report, long as it was, left silent certain views of higher education (for example, as a preparation for professional life) that could and arguably should have been taken seriously.

However, it does not follow that, despite the difficulties faced by the Committee, we should abandon the sense that higher education has responsibilities in the modern world. If the contemporary age is one of supercomplexity, then that supercomplexity itself - with its multiple agendas, infinite change, and radical unpredictability - offers a set of agendas for institutional leadership, research and teaching that at least place new responsibilities on the university. An age of supercomplexity requires nothing less than we reconceive and reshape our universities. The wider world requires nothing less of us.

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