

Excellence and inclusion in universities

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Plato argued that people are motivated by three rather different things: wisdom, honour and gain. Universities have always accommodated differing motivations and values, and I would argue that this is now more than ever the case. The pressure for universities to be “world-class “ continues to grow, explicitly encouraged by government in many national systems where there is a wish to increase the number of institutions in the world top 100. This affects not only those universities that appear in such a ranking. It affects all, either through aspiration to join that ranking or by having to live in the shadow of those more favoured institutions. At the same time many governments seek to increase economic efficiency and to advance equity by making universities more inclusive in their practices. There is clearly a tension between striving for excellence and for inclusion, one which I have previously discussed (Blackmore, 2016a).

Excellence and inclusion require definition. The current enthusiasm for world-class universities has elevated a particular kind of institution, but there are many different forms of excellence. It is presumably possible to be excellent at being inclusive for example. In a criterion-based system, all institutions can be deemed excellent if they achieve a particular set standard. So the idea of excellence has to be understood critically and in its context. Inclusion is a term that is most usually employed when considering the socio-economic backgrounds of students attending universities. However, inclusive practice can have a wider meaning and application. There are issues of inclusion for faculty, in terms of who is appointed and promoted. Beyond that though is the question of whom the university in its totality includes and serves. One might ask what kind of curriculum is taught, but also what kind of research is undertaken and what sort of relationship the university has with its local communities.

Universities have to live with a number of competing policy objectives that require attention. Thus an institution may be called upon to become world-class and at the same time to be more inclusive. In the UK this would be measured on the one hand through a research excellence framework that rewards research of the highest international quality and on the other through an institution being monitored against inclusion benchmarks that relate to the socio-economic background of students attending the institution. These two pressures have in some way to be accommodated within an institution.

The situation is further complicated because not all of an institution's outputs can objectively be measured and because motivations may be very varied and in some cases may not be declared or even recognised. A number of writers have distinguished between prestige and reputation as drivers (for example Brewer, Gates and Goldman, 2002). Prestige is usually awarded by insiders, is hard to value objectively and can be held by only a few – a Nobel prize for example. Reputation comes from satisfying outsiders and can generally be quantified. All can have a sound reputation if a set standard is met. The idea of a prestige economy has been used to explore academic life. It has been claimed that research is essentially a prestige-generating activity, while teaching produces only reputation, so that

research always trumps teaching in academic esteem (Blackmore 2016b). By extension, where being excellent or world class is defined largely by research prowess, the seeking of excellence is likely to distract attention from inclusiveness.

A review of academic papers and government reports in the US, UK and Australia showed that the main excellence drivers in higher education worldwide are to do with global competition, massification and marketisation. Those for inclusion are mainly social and government pressures. Interestingly, government documents rarely refer to excellence and inclusion together. Some consequences can be seen. Some commentators note that global competition is driving increased stratification and social exclusion (Bolden et al, 2014). Internationalisation is seen as a prestige generator rather than a site for social inclusion (Seeber et al, 2016). A number of writers have pointed to an increase in “rank seeking” behaviours in universities, both by the institution and by its staff and students.

All universities exist within a national and regional policy context that directly or indirectly influences their practice. These can include the level and distribution of funding for teaching, together with source, whether from the state or individual, and support for student access. It also includes the way in which research is funded, how funding is focused and how it is distributed. It may also include support or requirement for forms of community engagement. Universities also exist within a wider ecosystem of institutions which includes a private sector and also further education.

Universities also exist within a social context, linked to the policy context. They are influenced by and often have to take account of social attitudes which may constrain action. For example, where excellence is construed in terms of very high level entry grades of students there may be a reputational cost to a university if it seeks to contextualise admissions to take account of the differing life chances to date of potential students.

It has been argued that the tension between a desire for prestige-generating over reputation-producing activity can distort policy formation and implementation (Blackmore 2018a). It could be argued however that the driver for global excellence is so strong that it overcomes any other stimulus that is offered by natural and regional government.

A recent study of three institutions in the UK, US and Australia, each of which claimed that it was being both excellent and inclusive, sought to find out how the tension between the two was being experienced and managed (Blackmore, 2018b).

Arizona State University (ASU) has had an explicit role to serve its community since the outset; University of New South Wales was founded as a technical institution after the Second World War; Kings College London was founded with the original intention of providing service to society. In all three institutions, re-focusing on excellence and inclusion together meant returning to the institution’s roots, to rearticulate its purposes. It was believed by interviewees that this was motivating for faculty who often preferred a more socially responsible and less corporate view of the institution. Not all interviewees took the moral high ground. It was also acknowledged that in a time of cost-conscious governments and also right-wing populism, demonstrating one’s relevance to society made pragmatic good sense. Certainly institutions have to be aware of how their actions will be understood by those beyond the institution.

Refocusing the university's mission was acknowledged to be a slow process. At ASU it has taken over 15 years. In the other two institutions, change has been much more recent and has been helped by very open consultation processes. It was widely felt that some basic beliefs had to be challenged. Foremost was a very narrow conception of excellence that had to be addressed to get beyond a rather simplistic opposition of excellence and inclusion. All institutions were concerned to develop a very strong narrative, about inclusive excellence, which was believed to have a very important function of helping to guide behaviours in a complex institution that could not be micromanaged.

Inclusive practice in teaching tends to mean serving a more diverse student population, with a wide range of needs for teaching. This can be tackled most successfully either by a very large institution, such as ASU, or one that has strong local and regional links. For most institutions, other than the very largest, inclusive practice is likely to be achieved by collaboration with other institutions more than it is by going it alone.

Inclusive approaches to research meant dealing with the prestige that is attached to basic research, as compared with applied research. A way forward was to see the two as complementary rather than in opposition. This means paying attention to the transition from basic research to application, with an acknowledgement that many of the most fast-moving research areas are interdisciplinary in nature. This has led to faculty reorganisation in the institutions.

Academic staff recruitment and recognition has in two of the institutions been an important way of recognising staff commitment to areas which the institution wishes to value. A recent development has been the introduction of teaching-led career pathways, with attention paid to trying to ensure parity of esteem with more traditional academic roles.

None of the universities claims to have found all the answers. However it may be that by having recognised the tensions inherent in universities and by tackling them directly, the institutions have come to grips with an issue that is often not fully recognised either in many universities or at the level of national policymaking.

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