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‘Educating for Enterprise - the challenge for universities’

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In her keynote address to the Knowledge Transfer and Engagement Forum on 16 June 2006, the Australian Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Julie Bishop MP, posed the following questions: ‘(W)hat is the value of a university which does not work hand in hand with business to build economic growth in that university’s region? What is the value of providing professional degree courses which do not reflect contemporary practice? What is the value of a university which does not strive to strengthen regional economic capacities?’ This short paper seeks to respond to the Minister’s rhetorical challenge at the broadest level and to suggest that, central to all these purposes, is the notion of ‘educating for enterprise’.

What, first of all, is ‘enterprise’, for which we might wish to educate? The dictionary definition is quite helpful: ‘undertaking, esp. bold or difficult one; courage, readiness to engage in ~s; French *entreprendre* (entre between + *prendre* take)’. It is instructive to consider this in its current context of business enterprise, while reflecting that Spain’s Philip II spoke of the Armada as embarking on ‘the enterprise of England’. The piety of his desire to return lapsed lambs to the Mother Church is not in question, but it would be somewhat surprising if he had not also had half an eye on reducing competition for the spice trade and the depredations of privateering by Drake, Hawkins and Raleigh.

So let us accept that any modern definition of the term conveys the fundamental notion of economic motivation, i.e., that a more or less complex sequence of events, to which some degree of (financial) risk attaches, is to be undertaken with the intention of achieving material outcomes. And this, in its turn, sets the agenda for considering what ‘learning’ is necessarily impounded in such a concept of enterprise, if it is to be undertaken at all, let alone successfully and, consequently, how a particular process of teaching or educating might result in such learning being achieved.

But what is the institutional context in which educating for enterprise is, of itself, enterprised? How well- (or ill-) suited and equipped are they for this task? What are their motives and imperatives? And what may we usefully infer from the circumstances of the teacher and the learner, respectively?

There have been changes in Australian universities over the last 15 years which are not widely understood in the broad community, in part because mantra of ‘unified national system’ has obscured the very different kinds of institutions that now all bear the label ‘university’. Despite both apparent and very real similarities in a number of respects, e.g., the generally comprehensive nature of program provision, there are marked differences in mission, particularly between those institutions with a history of intensive involvement in research and the more recently enfranchised.

The word ‘university’ is worth a brief philological digression at this point, to remind ourselves that, under the accepted understanding of it as an ‘(e)ducational institution designed for instruction or examination or both of students in all or many of the more important branches of learning’, etc.,

lurks its Latin root word universitatem, meaning ‘the whole world’. And this is something that a modern university would never lay claim to being, nor attempt to be. But a majority of Australian tertiary institutions would claim to conduct both global and local operations, while also serving the local community.

What has quite clearly emerged from the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s, particularly in the conversion of the former State institutes of technology, is the applied university, in which all the programs are directed to assisting with entry to the professions or career mobility for those already in professional employment. Opting for this role has real institutional significance for what is taught, how it is taught, whom it is intended to attract as students and, crucially, the orientation that the students will have towards their studies.

The willingness of institutions to embrace the challenges concomitant on this choice is matched, in large part, by the changes that have occurred in the student clientele, particularly as a result of the shift to a mass higher education system, where ability and aspiration to participate are spread across nearly one-third of the undergraduate age cohort. This is in marked contrast to the era of one single, venerable institution of lofty academe and ‘dreaming spires’ per State, with the capacity to provide the opportunities of higher education to an elite of less than one-tenth of the eligible cohort.

In combination with other societal and demographic changes, the extension of access to academia beyond the purview of privilege has meant that many students will, of necessity, be obliged to work outside of and alongside their university commitment, simply in order to meet tuition and living expenses. And it is wrong to confuse this type of student with the ‘part-time’ student of the bygone era. That person was someone who chose to remain in full-time employment while studying for a degree at, traditionally, approximately half the intensity of their full-time contemporary and thus taking twice as long to complete their qualification.

The reality is that today’s full-time student is just as, if not more, likely to be found behind the counter at a fast food outlet or the wheel of a taxi as on a sporting field or in the library when not attending lectures and tutorials. This, in turn, influences the way they think about university life. It is, for

many, no longer an opportunity for ‘enculturation’ through reflection but one characterized by a much more instrumental view of what is wanted and expected from university attendance.

Typically, many students come directly from a place of work to attend a lecture or tutorial; they may spend some time on-line in a computer pool or a wireless hotspot using their own laptop; they may visit the library for access to hard copy resources; they may want convenience food from the cafeteria but rarely the social interaction of the Union bar, and, finally, they will most probably return to work or to a non-institutional place of residence where some limited time is devoted to the necessary out-of-class preparation, either late at night or between day time shifts.

There is a simple and understandable imperative in the lives of these students. If they are to find any utility in tertiary education, it will be through delivery that is accessible in every sense of the word: intellectually, culturally and functionally. They want education as a service that is, or can be, organized to suit their convenience, to cope with their work pressures and demands on their time and, not least, to be seen as professionally compelling, as giving them a ‘competitive advantage’.

The University of South Australia is an institution that has structured itself to meet these needs. It was established to be a university that provided entry to the professions and served the educational needs of those who had previously suffered, or continued to carry the burden of, prior educational or social disadvantage. Its educational philosophy is rooted in the twin traditions of its antecedent institutions: an institute of technology with 100 years of practical technical education and a coalition of teachers’ colleges, many established in the 1950s, that had coalesced as a statewide college of advanced education in 1982.

Out of this has sprung a university that teaches no general degrees: no all-purpose Bachelors of Arts or Science. To repeat what was said above: every course is intended to prepare people for entry to the professions or to assist in career mobility within them. And the combination of the students’ backgrounds and the diverse set of course offerings dictates a need for a very high level of support and services to ensure that those students are given

every chance of success, permeating all of its work and structural arrangements.

In addition to the impact on purely internal matters, accepting this mission and its challenges also, of necessity, entails the development of special relationships with both current and prospective employers of its students. The university must at least be aware of the skills that enterprises will be seeking in graduate employees and, preferably, engage in a continuing dialogue on 'work readiness'.

Attunement to the needs of external stakeholders does not end with private enterprise. Government, at both State and Federal levels, is commonly a major employer of many graduates, whether allied to a specific profession such as nursing or teaching, or in more general fields of administration and the formation and implementation of public policy across a spectrum of disciplines. Consideration must also be given to the responsibility of Government to oversee both the public and private workplaces and, in particular, its requirements in relation to skills and technology transfers.

So what do we see as a consequence of responding to the needs of and sometimes pressure applied by these varied and disparate constituencies? We see the institution itself as an enterprise that acts in the mainstream of the life of the community, keeping up its part of the 'social compact' by which all enterprises operate: 'at the pleasure of society'. This type of engaged and responsive university seeks to impose on itself the same discipline as that of any private sector corporation: it must 'add value' through the delivery of its educational services if it is also to deliver on its corporate promise.

The university that is bent on educating for enterprise will do so in the most fundamental way: it will model itself on enterprise, submit itself to the same disciplines, in addition to those of academic rigour and generally conduct itself in a businesslike manner. Importantly, one of the most difficult challenges for an institution that is seen and sees itself as a repository of knowledge, is to admit its need to learn: to consult widely among all its stakeholders, but especially those with 'client' status, particularly the students and their employers.

But is not only the culture of the university that needs to change. The governance structures, indeed the whole infrastructure of decision-taking, can act as a considerable force for stasis when it comes to responding to the perspectives that reside beyond those of the academic community. The former Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, recognized this and pushed for reform of the Councils of Australian Universities, seeking a reduction in numbers and more outside representation. Interestingly, this presented few problems for the three South Australian universities. UniSA had already moved to a significant reliance on external Council members, chosen for either their involvement in large State Government service departments that typically employed numbers of our students, or from the world of business. The Finance Committee of UniSA's Council is almost entirely comprised of external business people, who focus on institutional application of business models that meet the standards and expectations of the wider professional community. Combined with a longstanding commitment to use of environmental scans, a highly-endorsed (by the Australian Universities Quality Agency) planning and review process, and high levels of managerial competence, UniSA has made a name for itself, in its own State and more broadly, as a 'can-do' university, an institution easy to do business with and one committed to teaching programs which exemplify the marketing slogan: Experience. The Difference.

There is, of course, a limit on the pedagogical devices at the university's disposal for teaching about the 'enterprise' conditions under which graduates will work: the practical elements of teaching and nursing courses are unarguably 'experiential', but are, of necessity, conducted under such close supervision as to leave little room for risk-taking and risk familiarization. For business disciplines, the use of computer-generated or role-playing simulations can provide a surrogate of sorts: at least hypothetical 'risks' can be taken and the consequential success or failure analysed, but the students are still insulated from the reality of what it is and what it feels like, to 'enterprise'.

All of the characteristics of the so-called 'real world' can be captured in one word: uncertainty. It goes without saying that 'uncertainty', in its everyday, working sense, is one of the key dimensions that schools of all types, from elementary to tertiary, seek to remove or control in its impact on their students: not to do so would jeopardize their primary mission of implanting

the building blocks of formal knowledge and the mechanisms for its further individual development. And yet, in regard to enterprise, as is widely acknowledged, coping with uncertainty is an essential ingredient that cannot be replicated realistically in the classroom.

This is well-illustrated by an anecdote sent recently to a management education discussion group. The writer complained that experience of undergraduate study comprised a great deal of theoretical, 'content' knowledge, together with skills in analysis and reasoning. The 'informal' and, in his view misleading, learning was the implicit message that all problems are clearly defined and have correct solutions. He went on to describe his disabuse of this notion as soon as he entered the workforce and its replacement by the effort to find workable, rather than 'correct' solutions to ill-defined and possibly intractable problems. He then grappled with the consequences for better teaching thus:

Most of the theory that we teach students is wrong, in the important sense that in making theory sufficiently abstract to generalise to many situations we throw away many of the contingencies which apply in the real world of application. There is abundant research evidence that what is learned in the classroom often gets poorly transferred into working practice. We need ways of teaching students the important skills of translating between theory and practice. An ideal route is to study alongside work or real world projects and to continually move between study and practice. However, this is often not possible. Hence we look for routes to provide students with the opportunity to grapple with applying theory in complex and messy settings which mimic some of the difficulties of real world applications. Hence the value in such approaches as role plays, case studies and simulations. (M.P. Fenton-O'Creevy, 2006, Management Education and Development Discussion group)

We have, however, already suggested that, desirable – necessary, in the case of many professions – as such forms of teaching are, they do not necessarily get to the heart of educating for enterprise in a 'risky' or uncertain environment since, of necessity, the degree of supervision of the practice learner is so close as to militate against realism.

So, together with itself modeling the behaviour of an enterprise – ‘walking the talk’ – and including as many opportunities as possible for learning through simulation or immersion, what options are available to a university to educate for enterprise? Unsurprisingly, we believe that the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) program and other activities that may be broadly termed ‘community engagement service learning’, offer some of the best possibilities in this regard. Practice of the soft skills widely sought by employers, including project management, communication, teamwork and small group leadership, is an almost unavoidable consequence of participation in such activities. More importantly, however, an opportunity is presented to challenge student to accept and work with many of the risks that are commonly found in the enterprise environment: scarce resources vs limitless opportunity; causal ambiguity; incomplete information; constrained decision-making, conflict of goals, organizational politics and impediments to the implementation of plans.

Thus we would conclude that the measures to be taken in ‘educating for enterprise’ fall into three distinct categories: those of an environmental or contextual nature, to convey enterprise experience through (favourable) interaction with the institution’s own processes and procedures; those of what may be considered a ‘conventional’ pedagogical nature, comprising extensive use of (relevant, well-run) simulations, supervised practice and industry placement; and, finally, the rich potential of an ‘unconventional’ pedagogy from which a truly student-centred and self-paced learning results. We believe that the possibilities offered to a wide circle of stakeholders through the development of a robust model of service learning through community engagement is an opportunity to be seized.