This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30036854

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2011, The Author
TODAY’S UNIVERSITY: MIMICRY VERSUS CREATIVITY

By James Campbell
Deakin University, Australia

Prospero, you are the master of illusion.
Lying is your trademark.
And you have lied so much to me
(lied about the world, lied about me)
that you have ended by imposing on me
an image of myself.
Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,
that is the way you have forced me to see myself
I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
and I know myself as well.

Aime Césaire, Une Tempete

Introduction

There are significant dilemmas associated with the contemporary way in which convergence to neo-liberal ideology and norms coheres to support an economic view of ‘development’ and ‘modernization’ that seriously threatens values integrity in what Samir Amin refers to as ‘peripheral’ societies. Recognizing this issue leads us to look more deeply at the problems of convergence and divergence from neo-liberal hegemony and norms when we engage issues of institutional reform and to what extent we can map out an alternative way of engaging globalization that allows the maintenance of creative values integrity and dignity. The core argument of this paper is that the problem of creativity in higher education is related to our struggle against isomorphic mimicry. If we are to challenge or ameliorate the influences of convergent isomorphism in higher education, upon what theoretical basis can we begin our discussion?

Delinking

Before we discuss the specific issue in regards to higher education we need to step back a bit and engage the broader problems of how to create and sustain a space for creativity in higher education given the nature of neo-liberal globalization. To do this we will turn to a brief discussion of the work of Samir Amin. Samir Amin along with other scholars such as Giovanni Arrighi (Arrighi and Silver 2001) Andre Gunder Frank (Frank 1974), Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein 1995) has provided us with seminal interventions into the problem of globalization, development and imperialism.

According to Samir Amin the way that the currently unequal relationship between nation states operates in the world under actually existing capitalism means that peripheral nations (defined as nations not at the centre of the capitalist world) are constantly re-colonized and at a severe disadvantage in relation to the central capitalist states. Compounding this is the
argument that the crisis within contemporary capitalism is always experienced most acutely in the periphery, in the most marginalized colonized and exploited parts of the world.

For Samir Amin the solution for those societies at the brunt of this process is to ‘delink’ and escape the problems of external dependence and subordination to Eurocentric forms of capitalist expansion that characterize their relationship with the central capitalist economies. It is important to note that for Samir Amin delinking is not a synonym for autarky. In other words it is not synonymous with a total and irrevocable retreat from or refusal to engage with neither global scientific currents nor a retreat from global ideas (Amin 1987; Amin 1987).

For Amin delinking in part requires ensuring that public policy is driven by the interests of people-centric development. This approach is diametrically opposed to approaches based on subordinating development to the needs and agenda of a neo-liberal global agenda. The notion of delinking is controversial and the details of Amin’s argument are complex. The essential point I want to raise in respect of the concept is its focus on the need for national policy to not simply adjust to so-called global rationality but rather to base its objectives on the needs of the local society and polity. Economies and societies are not all cut from the same cloth. We need to challenge the idea that the difference between ‘advanced’ and ‘developing’ societies is merely a matter of progress along a universal linear track (Dussel 1993).

Policies aimed at developing a creative society (and hence a creative higher education sector) must be framed and informed by an understanding of the specificities and particularities of that society, and its particular historicity. The issue for us to focus on is how public policy formulation helps to address the particular problems issues and aspirations of the host society. Samir Amin’s idea is that delinking is not utter autarchic withdrawal. Rather it is based upon recognition that we need to challenge the idea that all that is needed for ‘development’ is for nations to simply adjust to the needs of global capital and its cultural agenda.

Challenging the ‘rationality’ that underpins contemporary neo-liberal globalization is a precursor to asserting indigenous and non instrumental values in a higher educational system, that is infused with commitment to people centered values and commitments. The generative concept of delinking provides space, a pedagogical opening for us to ask, how we can ensure that policy and policy implementation is driven and informed by local social considerations rooted in the developmental needs of a particular society and its institutional contexts.

Creativity

The issues of creativity in universities become central to addressing people centred needs. It is also a pivotal concept and practice in challenging mimicry and neo-colonial captivity. Higher educational institutions can either act as conduit for colonising the mind or as sites to help ‘decolonise the mind’ (Thiong’o 1986). Creativity understood both as a precondition to human dignity (Fanon 1968) and as an example of it itself cannot exist in a situation characterised by pure mimicry. When we think about creativity we usually don’t think that it can be found in people or in institutions that simply imitate or copy from others. Simple imitation without critical appraisal is as the late Syed Hussein Alatas argues a sign of a captive mind. It is neither the sign of a creative person nor the practice of a creative institution. In discussing the characteristics of a captive mind Alatas argues that:
• ‘A captive mind is the product of higher institutions, of learning, either at home or abroad, whose way of thinking is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner.’
• ‘A captive mind is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems.’
• ‘It is incapable of devising an analytical method independent of current stereotypes.’
• ‘It is incapable of separating the particular from the universal in science and thereby properly adapting the universally valid corpus of scientific knowledge to the particular local situations.’
• ‘It is fragmented in outlook.’
• ‘It is alienated from the major issues of society.’
• ‘It is alienated from its own national tradition, if it exists, in the field of its intellectual pursuit.’
• ‘It is unconscious of: its own captivity and the, conditioning factors making it what it is.’
• ‘It is not amenable to an adequate quantitative analysis but it can be studied by empirical observation.’
• ‘It is a result of the Western dominance over the rest of the world.’ (Alatas 1974)

Given the clear and illuminating argument posited by Alatas how then do we engage the issue of reforming universities to be more creative? How do we avoid mimicry? How do we reinterrogate and change the way ‘status’ is viewed?

**Higher Education**

If education is to be made relevant to society and if creativity is to be the goal of higher educational institutions then it’s clear that the choice is not one of holding together an old outmoded factory metaphor for higher education and somehow also advancing the development of creativity. A critical part of engaging the issue of creativity in a university is to recognise that creativity is often inhibited and stymied by the practice of blindly following or mimicking what is often presenting as so called world class or universal. Neo-liberal hegemony expresses itself in part through institutional isomorphism on a global scale where convergence on a single model of higher education (and what is considered important as indicators of its success) is inculcated through the discourse of competition and compounded by mimetic influences (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000).

The argument of those who desire to pursue a homogenous and market driven future for higher education is that neo-liberal convergence is the path to prosperity and efficiency. The gradual erosion of differences between national and regional varieties of capitalism (and other forms of social organization) and institutions (such as universities) is for neo-liberal advocates a positive aspect of globalization (Levidow 2002). The pressures of competition (or better put the discourse of competition) when combined with a desire to mimic what is perceived to be of high status generates uncertainty in local values, achievements, aspirations and culture. In conditions of uncertainty organizations within a particular field tend to mimic so-called ‘peer’ organization that are deemed successful or have status (Mizruchi and Fein 1999, p.657). The articulation of status becomes the way dominant and asymmetrical relations between organizations are reinforced and legitimised.

**Evaluation**

One particular area of critical importance in reforming higher education lies in our systems and processes of evaluation. Currently one of the most socially powerful forms of evaluation
lies in university rankings tables. Given the pressure of isomorphic convergence in organizational fields a key way that such convergence to a norm is supported lies through the process of formal university ranking. Rankings confer status and reputation benefits or costs on higher educational institutions. The coercive, mimetic and normative processes of institutional isomorphism in higher education find critical expression in the practice and function of university rankings. Rankings legitimate and press the need to adapt higher educational institutions to hegemonic interests. Rankings tables now present themselves as a critical evaluative tool in higher education. They seek to establish the appearance of objective measures and grades for university performance(Campbell 2010). However, judging the success or failure of higher education from benchmarks decided on the basis of so-called ‘global’ standards is deeply problematic when the needs and problems of respective societies, polities and economies differ. Current rankings tables are an extremely narrow way of evaluating university performance.

Practical problems with rankings include: the subjectivity involved in selecting what is evaluated can lead to significant distortions in how we understand the nature and success of our higher educational institutions. Limitations on data restrict and inhibit the usefulness of rankings data to policy makers, the way rankings are structured limits their relevance to policy makers. Finally responding to rankings tables can make members of higher educational institutions react and shift their behaviours in ways that are inimical to the public good and to the stated aspirations of the institution. Tradeoffs that exist between the need to increase the volume of productivity in research based on increasing Key Performance Indicators and the quality and significance of the research in addressing the needs of the people are also potentially hidden from view in the contemporary ranking discourse. Fundamental problems accrue in competitive systems where the desire to ‘beat’ or compete against ‘international benchmarks’ can lead to wastage and a distortion of the universities mission given its more specific goals in the context of local national development. Critics of how we currently approach ranking also point to the ubiquitous and instrumental nature of appraisal rooted in a reduction of everything to quantification (Kanth 1997).

The actuarial and measurement culture which manifests in university rankings is a critical problem. Intangible values seem to have no place in such schemes. The reduction of higher educational achievements to numeric and tabular form has important and difficult consequences for policy (Rose 1991, p.673) . Institutions and the people within them are reactive. What this means is that they react to stimuli and external pressure. Numeric rankings tables provide an easy way to pass judgement on universities without having to delve into details. Rankings tables are easy to understand in a media environment dominated by quick sound bites and easily digestible generalizations. The apparent simplicity and objectivity of rankings can easily be used by politicians and ‘pundits’ to create a kind of educational panic which misdirects our debate about the value, values and direction of higher education. Higher educational institutions are not immune to this pressure as they respond to rankings (Campbell 1957, p.298) (Espeland and Sauder 2007, p.3). Thus rankings tables help to generate status anxiety within institutions and a broader educational panic within society in general.

Engaging with the direction of higher education and how we evaluate higher education based on inclusiveness, sustainability and relevance to national economic and social needs is a critical issue in organizational and pedagogical change. Given the complex economic, social and institutional context within which we must understand higher education, what then is the proper role of evaluation of our higher educational institutions? This issue goes to the
heart of our understandings of ideas of the role and nature of our higher educational institutions. If how we evaluate our higher educational institutions deeply effects what is done within them, then it follows that we must pay careful attention to the tools we use to evaluate higher education. Careful attention is necessary because what we evaluate and how we evaluate will have significant effects within our higher educational institutions. When we seek to understand what it is our higher educational institutions actually do and accomplish and what it is we think they ought to be doing and accomplishing we need to take into account the specific nature and context of a nation’s educational needs and understand the specific nature of educational institutions in relation to the host society.

The need to understand differentiation between universities given differing national and regional agendas and interests is the key here. Differentiation and diversity are important to a universities mission in a society. Diversified systems provide an opportunity for students from different backgrounds to access higher education and can be a significant way to address issues of social exclusion in higher education and ensure different paths to social mobility. Discussions of higher educational reform need to take into account the specific organizational and cultural dynamics within societies (Alatas 1975). Context matters.

**Conclusion: Reasserting the validity of context**

The argument of this paper is that there is in essence a significant tension within higher educational institutions between the pressures of status anxiety and educational panic generated through mainstream rankings and the desire to be creative and innovative. Such anxiety can negatively influence what is done within organizations. Anxiety acts to propel managers and leadership in higher educational institutions to attempt to subsume their educational goals and objectives to the need to improve in the rankings tables. Current ranking measures such as, for example, the Times Higher Educational ranking scheme, places universities within a framework of competition that is asymmetrical and disempowering. Global rankings represent an instrumentalist agenda in education at odds with the substantive and at times intangible values that a university seeks to instil and pursue.

Are we able to reorient and base reputation and status on evaluating how much higher education serves the interests of the people? (Campbell 2010) The practices that occur within higher educational institutions are critical to engaging the problem of overcoming intellectual ‘captivity’ and generating educational objectives that are people centered. The diverse missions of higher educational institutions and their commitments to social justice and cultural dignity need support in how we evaluate the success or otherwise of higher educational institutions. What would we evaluate to drive the agenda back towards a people centered perspective? In the final part of this brief paper I shall try to illustrate with an example.

When we take a look at the proposition that higher education must aid in social development human liberation and growth then one of the key issues is inclusiveness. Social inclusiveness which is closely related to issues of social justice, equity and participation and recognition is a key issue for economic development and decolonization as well as epistemological decolonization (Mignolo 2007). Thus some foci for us to consider in reorienting evaluation may include asking the following questions.

Are the quality and quantity of university outreach programs to the poor and marginalized measured in evaluations? How much weight is given to this? Is emphasis put on weighting
academic scholarship which has a connection to analyzing and resolving the problems of inclusion? In nations where there is a significant issue of rural poverty is the role of universities in addressing this taken into account? Is the universities important role in expanding access to higher education for the poor and marginalized measured and valued? To what extent do we evaluate and put weight on a universities contribution to the social good? Do we take this seriously in terms of the status of our higher educational institutions? Is a universities contribution to inclusive cultural empowerment given weight in what is evaluated?

What we evaluate helps to define what our higher educational institutions do. Tying our evaluations to people centered priorities and understanding the distinct roles that higher educational institutions play in societies which function in the interests of the people is a beginning in our efforts at developing an evaluation discourse informed by local needs and aspirations rooted in dignity (Campbell 2010). Recognizing that what we deem important enough to evaluate in higher education will by and large drive what is done in higher educational institutions is a simple and fundamental point. The question that arises from this is to what extent our evaluative criteria is driven by the specific and particular needs of a people centered agenda in regards to higher education or other less accountable agendas. If our evaluative agenda is driven by mimicry and a competitive ideology rooted in a reified and reductive economic agenda then the pressures on higher educational institutions to conform to the dominant agenda of neo-liberal hegemony will be hard to resist. Intellectual captivity as articulated, for example, by Alatas is reinforced by the educational panic that drives mimicry and subservience to so-called ‘global ranking’ evaluative discourse. Beginning a process of delinking understood as a commitment to human dignity and cultural empowerment in higher education is far from irrelevant to our arguments about knowledge generation.

References