

## The politics of the universities

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is about choice. It is a word we hear a lot about these days and which, in marketspeak, equates citizenship with consumption. Hence, political choice is no longer made by citizens, but by consumers and taxpayers. The corresponding objective of politics is to improve the choices which consumers and taxpayers face. This involves a shift in systems of governance from state-centred decision-making, where socially-defined outcomes are to be achieved through specified budgets, to state regulation designed to assist the market achieve economic efficiency, provide incentives for wealth creation, minimise government financial risk and maximise individual choice. Because the market is non-discriminating, it also ensures equity, diversity and opportunity.

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It has always seemed ironic to me that the process of delivering these goals so distorts the concept of choice. We have no right to choose to define ourselves in some different way, such as members of a society with a sense of collective identities, reciprocal obligations and common purposes. Nor can we define the kind of society in which we want to live as something other than a market.

The strategies of change management over the past decade were explicitly designed to circumvent popular participation, in the publicly expressed belief that we ordinary citizens (sorry, consumers and taxpayers) don't know what's good for us until it's done; that only the rational, disinterested 'true believers' (a term actually used by World Bank enthusiasts for the New Zealand model) in the bureaucracy, government, business or corporate lobby group can be trusted to define the national interest. The change agents have consciously set out to destroy the infra-structure and culture of what existed to the point where it can never be restored, and to expose it so deeply to those economic interests which operate under the rubric of 'the market' as to ensure their priorities remain paramount. These changes are, in turn, locked in through global economic integration and binding international agreements. Just as ordinary citizens were not responsible or rational enough

to decide whether these changes were desirable, we cannot be trusted to choose whether to continue them in the future.

For the past decade we have been told, and most have come to believe, that there is no choice - that there are no alternatives. That is, of course, nonsense. There are always alternatives. Economic theories come and go - even the chief economist at the World Bank has jettisoned the Washington consensus model on which the New Zealand experiment is based. Flawed policies lead to systems breakdowns. People get fed up, they question, and they resist. Such as the lessons of history. It is little wonder that champions of globalisation such as Frank Fukuyama try to convince us that history is dead (Fukuyama, 1992).

At a time of great turmoil for our universities, we do have choices. Today, I want to focus on four aspects of the politics of the universities - government policy; internal managerialism; internationalisation; and the closure of critique - and the choices we currently face.

Reflecting on the blueprint for the universities back in 1994 Ruth Butterworth and Nicholas Tarling warned:

The object is ideological. The millenarian vision of ideologues involves an unremitting attack on the structures of democratic pluralism. Their central project is the negation of community values and the redefinition of the citizen as merely consumer. The aim involves the destruction of that sense of communal responsibility which infused the creation of the modern democratic state ... When public activity is privatised, the very idea of society is undermined. These are the issues that New Zealanders have to consider (Butterworth & Tarling, 1994: 250).

These issues are before us now in the Tertiary Education Green Paper. But they have (at least) a decade-long pedigree. In 1987 the Treasury's post-election briefing papers advocated the separation of university functions into: *teaching*, to be funded by student fees, loans and backed by a declining government subsidy; *research*, funded by competitively neutral tendering with private researchers for state funds and private research contracts; and *entrepot* or storehouse functions, funding of which would be a matter of government choice (New Zealand Treasury, 1987; New Zealand Business Roundtable, 1988). Within months a Business Roundtable report had proposed turning state universities into profit-driven State Education Corporations (SECs) run by government appointed boards of directors. These SECs would be fully self-funding, operate in a competitively neutral commercial environment and be driven by consumer sovereignty. Existing staff would reapply for their jobs and be appointed for fixed terms. A subsequent officials' paper in 1992 confirmed the underlying premise that 'academics must demonstrate their utility to society by placing themselves in an open market and accordingly compete for students who will provide the bulk of core funding through tuition fees. If academic research has a value it can stand up to the rigours of competition for limited funds' (Robinson, 1992).

It has taken them 11 years, and several defeats, to get as far as the current Green Paper. The formula remains the same: market/consumer-driven funding accompanied by tighter central government control. There is the same the dogmatic recitation of market ideology with no pretence of empirical research or even substantive modelling. The submissions on the Green Paper, which were only released last month after the Ombudsman's intervention, shows limited support for any of the government's proposals and no mandate to proceed. We now know why they wanted to keep it secret. For a government so attentive to its international pedigree, it has seemed quite oblivious to international censure. Even the pro-market OECD has criticised the confrontational approach taken by the government to tertiary restructuring, and the lack of substantive evidence to support previous proposals. The OECD's 1997 report on New Zealand asked:

Do the 'market forces' function effectively? If not, what steps can government take to put in place the conditions (or remove the obstacles to) their effective operation? Such evidence as was made available to us is weak or non-generalisable on these points and requires considerable caution in its use. We were not aware of analyses which have looked into the extent to which preferences of current or potential learners and the needs of the economy and society are not (or are) being met.

A key concern in this respect is the adequacy of information for decision-taking for all stakeholders on unsatisfied demand, attrition and completion rates, re-enrolment, changes of orientation by students (OECD, 1997: 12).

For students of government policy since 1984 such comments are nothing new. The shift from an administered state-centred model to one driven by consumers and markets has applied an ideological template to almost every activity of the state. While the detail has varied and the model has evolved, the process, form and rationale have remained consistent. In a consumer-centred model preference for state over private is anathema; so is any government-designated hierarchy or differentiation between products. A similar pattern can be seen, say, with housing vouchers or the creeping privatisation of the hospitals.

We are now seeing chronic systems failures in the government-constructed market, whether it is in health, housing, electricity, telecommunications; chronic problems facing the economy in economic growth, employment, trade, the balance of payments, foreign debt; and unacceptable distributional and consequences - the increasing growing of income and wealth, the depressing state of Maori well-being, the nation's deteriorating physical and mental health. This failure is an international phenomenon, leading to a rethink of the obsessive view that the market can do everything. Values of social cohesion, planning for future needs, investment in future social and physical infrastructure are all re-emerging in the international debates. To use a favoured analogy, the free market bicycle has become very wobbly.

The politics of choosing not to follow that path are different from 1989/90 when we turned back Labour's very similar 'reforms'. The Vice Chancellors are divided as they buy into the competitive model. The Students Associations face a struggle with the onset of voluntary unionism next year. University staff are demoralised, insecure and struggling to cope with mounting workloads. But we are lucky that the concerted assault on the universities is coming so late in the day. There have been some important backdowns and delays in the past year - the holidays laws, the ARST, the tariff cuts on textiles, the MAI negotiations. The political instability is also real. The white paper, intended as a final statement of government policy, is still due sometime in early to mid-September. The first task is to affect the climate in which the cabinet committee makes its decisions; then maintain pressure while the paper is finalised; and sustain the assault at home and overseas once it is released.

That is a short-term goal. The harder question is how we address the need for genuine reform to the universities. Both Labour and Alliance support the appointment of a tertiary commission, lead by someone from overseas, to review the present and future needs of the country based on fundamental educational and social goals. We need to believe that can still be achieved, and we need to be thinking about those options now.

## **Managerialism**

My second focus is much closer to home, the internal restructuring and strategic choices being made in the name of the universities. I deliberately do not say by the university, because they are not. According to my Oxford dictionary a university is not just an educational institution but the 'members of it collectively'.

Before the neo-liberal model can become operational they need to secure changes to the power relations, decision-making mechanisms, priorities and culture of traditional universities. Externally, that requires changes like the direct employment relationship between Vice Chancellor and staff in the State Sector Act and the Green Paper proposals for risk management, performance monitoring and financial accountability, statements of intent between the ownership ministers and their universities, and greater ministerial control of university governance.

Internally, those changes are secured through what is currently termed 'managerialism'. Martin Trow remarks that the 'ism' identifies this is an ideology, not just an administrative technique (Trow, 1994: 11). It changes the nature and function of the institution. The university becomes a surrogate commercial business whose product is sold to customers - government, students and research users - at the competitive market price. The traditional relationship of trust between government and universities is replaced by that of purchaser/provider and shareholder/management. The bottom line of the budget becomes the determinant of success.

The whole becomes disaggregated into component parts which are designed to maximise allocative efficiency, localise incentives and increase transparency - irrespective of the increased transaction and opportunity costs, and distortions to the optimal activity of the whole. Teaching becomes a commercial transaction assessed through one-dimensional performance appraisal. Research, also commodified, and detached from teaching, is assessed in similar ways. The public good and entrepot functions disappear. Terms such as 'standards of excellence', 'competitive', 'dynamic', 'internationally renowned', 'premier', enter the lexicon through which universities market themselves; academics are expected to re-conceive their qualifications, functions and promotional prospects accordingly (Fairclough, 1993: 133). This 'hard' form of managerialism demands a continuous reshaping of the university as it responds to incentives, competition, performance assessments and market demand.

The university emerges from this process as a neo-liberal enterprise. It ceases to be a collective whose value depends upon intellectual reputations, integration of its activities and the maintenance of a vibrant academic community. Its members, once motivated by a sense of public service and intellectual mission, are deemed untrustworthy to serve the interests of the government, public and/or institution and dismissed as vested interests out to capture the university for their own ends. Removed from the decision-making process, academics become mere wage labourers selling their services for a price, subject to strict employment contracts, performance appraisals and managerial oversight (Wilmott, 1995: 993). Labour market deregulation reinforces this deprofessionalisation, as national awards are replaced by enterprise, and then individual, contracts. Status is delinked from pay, making collective agreements and relativities impossible. Performance incentives and differential pay scales reflect market demand. Pay becomes a private affair determined between employer and employee. The academic community has been privatised.

The irony is that, while we fight the government's imposition of this agenda, the administrations of our universities all over the country are doing it voluntarily. Rampant, sometimes reckless, entrepreneurialism has overtaken New Zealand's universities. The pattern is strikingly similar to the shift in central state governance. Control over resources, policy and direction remains centralised, while responsibility for delivery within reduced budgets, cost cutting and revenue generation falls to the lower levels. Centralised monitoring falls away, except for key financial performance indicators. Delivering Treaty of Waitangi responsibilities and redress for 'market-failure' through non-market behaviour and cross-subsidisation becomes anathema. Devolved entities look outside for funding and seek synergies with commercial enterprises, be they corporate firms, CRIs, polytechnics, senior secondary schools or overseas 'providers'. The whole gives way to fragmented, competing sites which logically then become quasi-autonomous entities and might as well secede. The uni-versity gives way to the multi-versity.

Decision-making based on trust that values the insights and expertise of the academic community gives way to executive imprimatur. Collegial processes are undermined as major decisions are redefined as employment, financial or managerial concerns, despite their academic consequences. The latest fads - such as divisional structures - are promoted for managerial convenience, often with no empirical research or explanation of the academic implications.

Employment practices reflect the 1980s theory of the firm, leaving aside the subsequent shift in theories of corporate governance, universities are not factories producing widgets, or even public relations firms selling an image. Their present and future worth depends on the international

reputation of its degrees and its research - ultimately, on the intellectual capital of its academics. Yet morale has never been so low among both general and academic staff. Pay lags seriously behind the private sector. As recruitment problems raise demands for incentive payments in areas valued by the market. Differentials emerge that break down the collective agreement and the concept of the academic community. Staff are redefined as human resources, to be line managed by senior executive officers of primary activity centres - what we once called deans of faculties - and held accountable for quantitative outputs. The culture that binds a university becomes an obstacle to competitive efficiency, market responsiveness and financial accountability.

People who have dedicated themselves to their university look elsewhere. Some in the next generation of senior academics buy into the business model. Others become cynical, disillusioned and unwilling to take on administrative responsibilities within a culture which they find anathema and over whose direction they have little say. Young people abandon any longer-term expectations or loyalty. Postgraduate students, traditionally exploited as cheap labour in return for experience and a foot in the door; find that trade-off is for gotten as their workload increases, but their hours and pay are cut back. These were once valued as a source of future academics; even if they complete their degrees, who can blame them turning off academic careers, at least in this country?

This is a pattern seen consistently across almost all areas of government restructuring. Few of those state entities, other than the police (and the fire service?) had the degree of statutory and historical autonomy of the universities. They therefore had little room to resist. The university does. Once management gives away that ground, as it is currently doing, we stop being a university.

## Internationalisation

This is, to some degree, part of an international trend. The OECD's recent comparative report on tertiary education observed a growing convergence of policy, with an agenda for change that it described as 'extensive and volatile' (OECD, 1997: 108). However, countries' experiences, contexts, priorities and needs differed widely. New Zealand was again at the extreme of the spectrum (The subsequent West Report in Australia offers a close parallel, but this has been shelved by their conservative coalition government as politically untenable). Its direction had more in common with the World Bank's formula for third world universities:

- i. *user-charges* covering all living expenses, and some or all tuition fees, to increase pressure for efficiencies, with a limited number of scholarships provided for children of the poor;
- ii. *student loans*, to shift the costs onto direct beneficiaries, who are expected to make rational choices and anticipate their future incomes;
- iii. *private provision*, to increase competition, force down costs and supplement supply; and
- iv. any savings generated are *redistributed* to more socially profitable education at junior levels (World Bank, 1995: 10; Colclough, 1991: 201).

Few would question this priority on literacy and mass education. But if countries are to maintain any cultural and social identities, other than as consumer markets, they also require their own quality pool of knowledge, historical and cultural memory and expertise. My own observations of these policies in Guyana and Latvia confirmed my sense of what might happen here. Severe cuts to spending on university infrastructure and salaries had provoked an exodus of the countries' best academics and postgraduate students. The residual student body reflected an ability to pay rather than an ability to learn. The effects of a severe skill shortage were practical and ideological. The fragile storehouse of indigenous knowledge was almost destroyed, along with the major source of independent critique. Local research by independent academics was minimal. With local universities unable to educate the next generation of officials, business people, teachers and intellectuals, those who would run the country's government and economy in future years were likely to be trained in overseas, primarily United States, universities or seconded from international



financial institutions and governments as part of aid packages or loan conditionalities. Fortuitously for their sponsors, many would bring with them a commitment to neo-liberal ideas.

Privatisation at the domestic level was paralleled by 'free trade' in education services internationally. Once education is subsumed within the free trade paradigm, it stops being a means to convey unique identities and cultural values, an arena of much-needed contest and critique, and an activity valued for itself. It is transformed into a tradeable commodity to be bought and sold on world markets like any other good or service. The non-economic values implicit in knowledge, education, history and culture are erased. Logically, there is no boundary at which internationalisation ends so that the local can be protected.

Most countries still recognise that national control over their education system is essential to protect cultural and social, as well as economic, values and goals. Some have greater economic and human capacity and willingness to retain that control, as evidenced from various OECD countries' commitments to the GATS during the Uruguay Round. The New Zealand government guaranteed not to discriminate between local and foreign private tertiary providers. At the time, AUS warned that moves to remove the distinction between public and private could mean tertiary education beamed in from offshore, or provided by foreign universities here, could no longer be subject to requirements for local content or other 'disguised' trade barriers that would make it too difficult for them to operate. We were told that would not happen and we didn't understand. We understood perfectly.

In the May 1998 budget the government announced a competitively neutral system for funding public and private universities. The white paper can be expected to extend that principle into regulatory and funding policies. Last month a senior ministry official asked why students should not be allowed to take their subsidies offshore - in other words, why is it necessary to retain facilities to train people in dentistry, geology, medicine, engineering, commerce if they can go to Australia or beyond? Even viewed from the 'consumers' viewpoint, this has serious flaws. There is no guarantee universities in other countries will accept their entry qualification, offer them places or charge fees that are remotely affordable. But the proposition begs the prior question, which the market model has never addressed - what is the purpose of government subsidies? Leaving aside ACT's policy of zero subsidies, even the Roundtable talks about 30 percent public benefit. What does that entail? What return does the country expect for this investment, and how will that be secured if the consumer takes the subsidy offshore? Indeed, taken to its logical extreme, all students could study overseas, removing the need to maintain any universities in New Zealand. What would the country be getting for its investment? And what would a New Zealand without universities look like? What would happen to all those public good and storehouse functions that universities? Wananga will never have the resources to take the place of the universities, so where should Maori choose to go and expect some indigenous content and recognition?

If you view education purely as a commodity to be traded in an international market place taking vouchers offshore makes perfect sense. For international trade to operate efficiently, changes must be made to the domestic market too. A consultant's report prepared for the Marketing Development Board confirmed that free trade in education services would require:

- liberalisation of the foreign direct investment regime;
- liberalisation of immigration policies for students and service personnel;
- deregulation of the framework governing universities' commercial activities;
- a more market-responsive administration and decentralised control;
- increased discretion to universities to charge fees;
- ability to raise venture capital through loans and equity;
- market-driven funding systems to encourage rationalisation of courses;

- greater flexibility in payments to staff in areas of scarcity and demand, including replacement of national or enterprise awards with individual employment contracts;
- incentive-based salary structures to encourage efficient use of resources, increase competitiveness and improve productivity; and
- competitive neutrality between the public and private sector in areas like taxation, depreciation, dividend on investment, capital charge on the use of state resources and assets (Hugo Consulting Group, 1987).

In other words, the state-run universities would have to be privatised.

Rejecting this model is not to deny that some degree of globalisation is occurring, nor to suggest that internationalisation of educational is a bad thing. As a community of scholars, universities are intrinsically international. A Carnegie Foundation study of academics in fourteen countries reported in 1994 how the academic community has long embraced internationalisation through study, research and teaching abroad. Academics have incorporated international material in curriculum, participated in conferences, published in international journals and, more recently, engaged in exchanges on the Internet. The report considered it 'especially encouraging to find a deep conviction among faculty that higher education is, in fact, an international enterprise and that the academic profession is becoming a global community'. It went on to identify a series of vital questions with which universities and the academy needed to engage:

What will be the consequences of the new electronic, international age, and how will the professoriate adapt? How will a newly connected 'network of scholars' affect campus policy-making? Will we, for example, see common procedures in evaluation of scholarship? Will procedures regarding credits and courses and student evaluation begin to converge? In the days ahead, we anticipate that in all of these matters national boundaries will become less consequential to intellectual work (Boyer et al., 1994: 17, 20).

At the same time, the study reported an overwhelming feeling of 'professional obligation to apply their knowledge to the problems of society, building a bridge between theory and practice'. At heart, '[c]olleges and universities are deeply embedded in the societies they service' (Boyer et al., 1994: 17, 18). This assumes a balance between engagement in the international education arena and the contribution of universities and academics to the communities, in which they live and serve. That assumption sits uncomfortably with the idea of free trade.

As Simon Marginson stressed in the opening lecture in this series, these are critical questions and tensions which New Zealand's universities must address creatively. There are choices about how far that integration goes, and what forms it takes. These options operate at the level of government policy and in the modes through which individual institutions choose to internationalise.

## **Ideological closure**

My fourth focus, the politics of intellectual debate, is both topical and sensitive. In meeting these challenges it is important to remember that university autonomy and academic freedom are neither absolute nor pre-ordained. They are the products of their time. Their meaning and justification shifts along with the context in which they being asserted, defended and challenged. The stakes are high; the prize is hegemony over knowledge and ideas. Within social democracy, there was value in promoting pluralism, in promoting diversity and the apparent willingness to test and debate the prevailing orthodoxy. Governments created the appropriate regulatory mechanisms to promote that outcome, with all its contradictions. That era has gone.

In shifting from state-centred social democracy to market liberalism the concepts of orthodoxy, norms, truth, the national interest have to be redefined. Successful transition requires the construction of a new consensus that reveres individualism, contract, competition and markets. The

underlying belief in the rationality of market forces, which operate according to the laws of economic science, implies a closed approach to knowledge and ideas. There are no rational alternatives. Education can therefore offer refinements, variations on the theme, and can train people to apply and enhance the relevant techniques. But there is no need for, no legitimacy in, a contest of ideas. Insisting on diversity is to indulge in political correctness and distort the pursuit of rationality, market equilibrium and economic truth. Hence, courses on macro- and micro-economics, the law of contract, or clinical psychology should not be distorted by forced injection of Maori or gender perspectives. Anything which the market does not reward by an adequate price has no value and should be discontinued.

This fundamentally changes the nature and function of the universities. University autonomy and academic freedom have to be regulated by new priorities, principles and mechanisms which set the legitimate boundaries for debate. Hence, when Treasury left funding of entrepot functions to 'government choice' it dismissed concerns that this would impinge on academic freedom.

The amount of academic time producing social benefits through discharge of the entrepot [storehouse] or research functions and funded directly by government departments is likely to be very limited. The issue of academic freedom will only be of significance for a part of that very limited sub-set. Historically universities may have acted as a key source of free information and discussion on political and other sensitive issues. In the information age this is no longer the case and the very multiplicity of information sources is itself a form of protection - as modern totalitarian states have found (New Zealand Treasury, 1987: 178).

But again, this kind of change is not a linear process. Hangovers from earlier periods remain as contradictions which are embedded in the identity and current function of the universities. Hence, the battles fought during the last major assault on the universities in 1989/1990 produced a significant backdown on the Treasury-inspired proposals, including the statutory recognition of both academic freedom and the universities' 'critic and conscience' role. These contradictions continue to underpin the battle we are facing today.

Concern about the impact on academic freedom and the closure of debate is not the self-interested whingeing of a leftist academic who fears losing a foothold to propagate dissident political ideas. The defence of academic freedom is about maintaining a genuine diversity of perspectives, a broad range of contributors and a rigorous contest of ideas without which our communities, disciplines and economies will stultify. It is about training the minds of our students to analyse, critique and rethink the current orthodoxy. It is about moving with and ahead of the time in ways that make the country internationally competitive and allow it, and us, to play an active part in a rapidly changing, non-linear world. A strong commitment to academic freedom is an investment for the future.

This must specifically address Maori academic freedom. Maori academics work to a different dynamic and face pressures, risks and barriers of which we are ill-aware. They have always struggled to have their voices heard and be taken seriously ahead of white 'experts' within and outside the universities. Those who take a strong line, whether as advocates of *Iwi-tanga* or nationalists promoting Maori independence, have rarely had a safe space to speak, let alone job security, funding for research, institutional recognition or collegial support. The small space opened up in the 1980s has been retained in some universities, although it faces constant pressure from financial and ideological attacks. Holding the line, let alone expanding, Maori qualifications, courses and content, is difficult. In some pockets, Maori studies continue to expand, new staff are employed and research funding is available. But this is all very fragile, and depends continued political pressure and institutional goodwill. It is meaningless to talk about academic freedom - freedom of speech, thought and ideas - for Maori without *tino rangatiratanga*, without self-determination. Maori producing their own knowledge on their own terms is not just a benefit for Maori; it will enrich us all and helps set the future path of our country.



How far academic voices are silenced remains a matter of choice. Those who speak out are few and not always high profile. They are being attacked because they are being effective. There is safety in numbers. People are more vulnerable when they are isolated and picked off, whether by government policies that seek to shut them and their courses down, university entrepreneurs whose financial and managerial preoccupations dictate unacceptable academic outcomes, or ideological zealots who, in the name of 'freedom', seek to prevent a genuine contest of ideas.

## Some conclusions

The situation we face is challenging. It could be positive: we could embrace our role as scholars in the vibrant and expanding international community; we could relish in our role as critic and conscience of society; we could work collectively to find more efficient, effective and responsive ways of teaching and research; we could be more accountable to our students and employers; we could be more innovative in use of technologies and collaboration with other educational, commercial and social agencies; we could actively engage with the communities in which we live, work and serve to find ways to face the future together.

As Federico Mayor, UNESCO Director General, at a conference organised by UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education, warned '*if we create market universities run purely on market principles they may be of their age but they will not be able to transcend it.*' (THES, 1997: 12). The shape of the future is up to us. Last week in a communication with AUS Noam Chomsky offered the following advice:

The people of New Zealand can, if they choose, decide to separate themselves from the modern world and undertake radical experiments in the hope that somehow the lessons of experience and logic will not apply. If they do so, it should be with eyes open, not in the grips of some fanatic ideology.

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