

Contemporary Universities and the Production of Value

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Today, contemporary universities are encouraged to be innovative, creative, and foster knowledge production and knowledge transfer. These are a set of values, but they have a very specific meaning within the context of neoliberal capitalism. They encapsulate certain free market economic values that universities are encouraged to cultivate. In this way we can think about universities as being commodified—their core mission has become focused on creating greater economic value for the individual, for corporations, and for the society. In this focusing of the university mission on the economic there is a tendency to ignore other values that are important to a society including some which are important for a healthy economy. This paper will argue that making economic value superior to, rather than subservient to a broader understanding of value not only undermines the university but it undermines citizens and society in general. Contemporary large-scale societies, and indeed our global society, need individuals who are creative, reflexive and imaginative. They need to address a host of daunting problems that are environmental, political, economic and social. This work requires a different set of ideas about value and a different conversation about creating new value.

By drawing on Ronald Barnett's philosophy of higher education we argue that universities are much occupied with their 'acting' and 'knowing' efforts, while they forget the dimension of 'being' - who they are and what they want for themselves. By strengthening the voice of 'acting', universities take serious the socio-political demands for orienting themselves towards society. By sustaining the voice of 'knowing', universities also focus on the knowledge and learning outcome of teaching and research for the benefit of society. However, the voice of 'being' seems to have become muffled along the way in the effort to increase the volume of the other two voices. How does the voice of being sound for universities of today? 'Who' are they, and what do 'they' want for themselves? We reclaim the reality of the university itself – not with the aim of building up new ivory towers or receding into a secluded college withdrawn from everyday life and society. However, we do argue that the entrepreneurial potential of the university lies exactly in its own 'existential' reflection – what does the university care for, and how may society and the university engage in a joint project to increase the value potential of our future societies.

Selected references

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