Bulletin of HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

CONTENTS

Building Futures Oriented Universities

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*I*n 1962 the company Humble Oil ran an advertising campaign that claimed "Each day Humble supplies enough energy to melt 7 million tons of Glacier". Today this advertisement seems bizarre! It is likely that to a future generation the Lisbon Declaration, issued by the European University Association in 2000, which set a 2010 European target of becoming: "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion"[1] will seem equally hapless. After all, there is no mention of the environment, of a relevant ethically oriented values base, of a wider human context, nor of a vision reaching beyond the narrow economy and social maintenance of the status quo. The focus is totally on market share and maintaining present practices and assumptions.

In all of this, the link between values and institutional process is left unaddressed. Institutions and the cultures they support are expressions of collective consciousness. Human culture, which is the architecture of our shared values, is the collective expression of the human drive to secure a stable future. Institutions in the current era are the main expressions of these values. Throughout history there are examples of moments in civilisations when there is no longer a clear match between a dominant value set and the context they seek to manage. At such points societies either collapse or transform (Diamond, 2005). The great historian Ibn Khaldun described such points in his cyclic theory of asabiyyah in which social process was built around the cohesion (or lack thereof) of groups. The central premise he had was that once

a context has been stabilised entropy sets in. This, for Khaldun, was essentially internal and centred on the decay of values and vision in a ruling group. At the same time, this situation could also be the result of values that work in one context but fail to respond effectively to new contextual factors (Khaldun, 2004).

The Indian philosopher P. R. Sarkar also suggested cycles but argued that the cycles were related to dominant psychologies or modes of consciousness which he linked to the Indian *varnas* of worker, warrior, intellectual and merchant. He contended that when one mode was dominant it became so aligned with vested economic and political interests that ultimately it failed to respond effectively to new contextual determinants (Inayatullah, 1997). Ultimately societies and their institutions would fail because of the investment in forms of expression that maintained the vested interests of the few over the many. Sarkar suggested that such cycles could only be broken by individuals, he called them *sadvipras*, who looked out for the interests of all. He suggested that the education system was well placed to foster such morally courageous, holistic and visionary people (Bussey, 2010).

To understand institutions as expressions of collective consciousness is a powerful insight. It allows those working in them to (1) access deeper resources in challenging unsustainable practices and (2) promote forms of cultural development that transform dominant modes of activity. When the latter is aligned to values that offer new ethical and cultural visions of human potentiality the stage is set for cultural renewal.

Higher education is at such a crossroads. The dominant matrix of educational modelling is still firmly committed to the interests of a worldview and culture that is rapidly losing integrity, purpose and moral authority. Entropy has set in. This concept, originally from physics, posits that every system is maintained by energy flows. All such flows both draw on and leak energy – this latter process is known as entropy. Stable systems all ultimately fall victim to entropy or they change. Today there are signs aplenty that the dominant vision is no longer sustainable. Yet the drive to leverage crude forms of energy that is exemplified in Humble Oil's advertisement is still the dominant paradigm. Institutions of higher learning can challenge this paradigm by promoting alternative possibilities for human expression, challenging the monopoly on moral authority held by prestige universities and offering alternative models of excellence for university practice (Razak and Ramli, 2008).

Such institutions must adopt a futures-orientation that anticipates the needs of future generations and builds this mode of thought into the construction of policy and pedagogy today. Thus they become bridges to the future actively facilitating sustainable cultural and educational pathways for their staff and students. This requires the nurturing of new stories that promote values that can inform policy and

decision making and open institutional practice to creative engagement with the challenges of the present. All futures thinking is partisan in this way. It is designed to promote preferable futures over the probable (Bell, 1993).

The logic behind institutional transformation and/or failure can be captured in a series of premises that work the tension between the individual and their context, the role of institutional rationality in meaning making, the link between values and purpose and finally the centrality of new stories in transforming unsustainable contexts. The following set of premises present a logical sequence of assertions that deepen our thinking on engaging values in higher education.

Premise 1 (The Obvious) Institutions shape people and people shape institutions.
Premise 2 (The System) Institutions institute the rational as reality.
Premise 3 (The Paradigm) The rational is contextual and value laden.
Premise 4 (The Story) When the rational, i.e. the story, fails so do institutions (or they change).

"Ultimately societies and their institutions would fail because of the investment in forms of expression that maintained the vested interests of the few over the many."

The first and obvious point to be derived from this set of premises is that our institutions are already value laden. To use Lyotard's term, institutions are *performative* in nature (Smith, 1992); they perform the 'real'. Here of course the real is that subset of universal possibility that currently orders our relationships across a spectrum from the interpersonal, intrapersonal to the transpersonal and also between the various ecologies that flow across and through cultural space – natural, technological, axiological, epistemological and ontological.
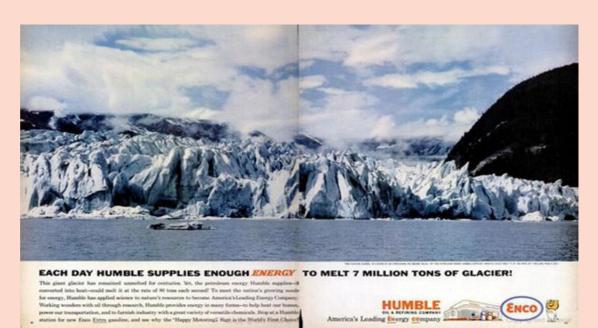

Figure 1: Humble Oil's "Enough Energy" advertisement from 1962

> **"The dominant matrix of educational modelling is still firmly committed to the interests of a worldview and culture that is rapidly losing integrity, purpose and moral authority. Entropy has set in."**

To embed values and service in higher education futures requires an engagement with new stories. These are immanent to the cultural field but are suppressed by a dominant story line that determines coherence. Thus they are part of the heterotopic possibilities of context and they emerge when context produces new signals that challenge the legitimacy of the dominant story (Bussey, 2009). Those of us who work in higher education are receiving a range of contested signals that are currently struggling for control over this story making process. Some stories are fear based and seek to lock out, control, define and legislate due process. Other stories are based on love and seek to generate possibility, hope, inclusivity and flexibility (Tolle, 2005). Whether we like it or not this is an unstable yet creative space. It is one in which violence and trust wrestle for the hearts and minds of us all.

Institutions are having to find their way in this environment by engaging what Ananta Kumar Giri calls a 'labour of learning' (2005: 27). Universities working with the present for the future are bridging institutions. They are working on understanding how stories can be used to generate new possibilities while retaining legibility within the current higher education narrative. Such institutions have done this by bridging between an emergent context for the university and the need to be seen as responsible. This is a delicate balancing act which requires openness to the future and a deeper understanding of control, not as based on managerialist fear, but as based on trust and a delicious anticipation of the creative possibilities that lie before them.

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Footnote:

1. The Lisbon Declaration can be found at http://www.bmwf.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/europa/bologna/EUA_lisbon_declaration__07.pdf