# Leadership insights

# HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

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# Introduction

Higher education: what exactly is it good for? This question needs to be asked again, in a climate when the shock of the Brexit vote, and the support for a populist and unpredictable President Donald Trump has made us more aware that there are major segments of our society that feel marginalised and disenfranchised. The Leadership Foundation thought leadership series on 'uncertain times' provides a timely opportunity to reconsider what role universities should have in creating the sort of society we want and whether some institutions are out of touch with the communities they are part of.  This paper explores aspects of marginality and difference using a reflective and personal approach, making links between the personal and the organisational, and ends with some provocations for leadership.

The paper begins by asking what role higher education can and should have, especially in ensuring that our universities are inclusive, educate for inclusion, and play a role in creating more just societies. It is constructed in a recognised reflective style, as a type of auto-ethnography, and therefore addresses these questions about the role of higher education through the prism of my own experiences, particularly as a later-generation Australian-born Chinese woman who has worked in the academy for over three decades and in four different countries. I aim to highlight some of the issues we need to think through in reconsidering the ultimate purpose of higher education. I am aware that there is a lot written about what the purpose of higher education should be (eg Barnett, 2012), but my aim in writing about it reflectively is to approach these debates from  a slightly different angle. It is easy to argue academically, but in the process it is also easy to polarise arguments about an issue which is complex, and involves our values based on our experiences as much as it does more abstract and intellectual ideas. By approaching these issues reflectively, through the light of experience, I aim to illustrate how some of the issues can be perceived and experienced in a more integrated way. Understanding how something is experienced, against the background and the context in which it occurred at the time, can give a more holistic and complex appreciation of a policy or practice. Reflective writing in this sense has a strong literary element (as with narrative approaches), and aims to introduce ideas and points in more complex, and perhaps sometimes more subtle, ways than more traditional academic writing.

The second part of the paper takes up the issue of how we can begin to ensure and create more inclusive cultures in our universities. I look at this primarily through the prism of reflexive possibilities, linked with strategies and approaches of critical reflection. Although we often expect our students to learn critical reflection skills, it is fairly rare to find reflection explicitly used as an approach to influence and change organisational culture in universities. I discuss the potential for reflection as a useful approach for leaders in shaping higher education organisational cultures to be more inclusive, and to model the sort of society we hope to create.

# Getting by, fitting in and the go between

Several decades ago I eagerly entered one of Australia's finest universities to study in a new social work program, touted at the time as the best in the country. Social work wasn't necessarily what I would have chosen to study, if left to my own devices, but it was my mother's life dream. Also, for someone of my background and social situation, the choices were fairly limited.  Being a later generation migrant (my Chinese ancestors had migrated to Australia some three generations earlier) we were still trying to become socially mobile, but we could only picture climbing to a fairly easy next rung of the ladder - social work, teaching or nursing. As migrants, we were interested in employability (although we didn't call it that back then) and so the middle professions were deemed the right sort of choice for a young Chinese Australian woman in the 1970s.

I slowly adjusted to studying social work, although I largely didn't understand what was being asked for in assignments. Early on I failed an assignment about my own values. So began a four year long process of socialisation to becoming a professional social worker. Unfortunately, I found that there was an inverse relationship between the subjects I enjoyed most, and those most directly related to social work. Luckily, I was good at doing role plays, as I had learnt from an early age

to be able to act well enough to 'fit in' with White Australia, despite my Chinese appearance. I learnt to be empathic and to listen: I found the less of myself I had to give away the better and the easier it was to be accepted. Perhaps I was being 'inscrutable' (from the perspective of my White Australian friends).

We did a lot of assignments working in groups. My background also helped here. I had learnt early in life that it often fell to people like me (marginal, female) to accommodate others, and so I was used to trying to make things work with a diverse range of people. I became the 'go-between' between different group members, especially between those of more mainstream backgrounds, and those who were more socially marginal. 'Mainstream' here means 'white', although my white friends tended to all be marginal of a type, in that they were all from working or lower middle class backgrounds. The group member who was more socially marginal than these was the student from Hong Kong.

So I learnt to get by. Perhaps because I learnt to apply life skills in order to fulfil course requirements. I wonder how much this is the experience of people from marginal backgrounds in higher education, and how much some 'fail' because they haven't worked out how to turn aspects of their cultural heritage to advantage.

# Other memorable experiences…

There were two other major experiences that stood out for me from those years.

The first experience occurred early in my first year of study. I had joined an extra curricula study group to discuss Christian values. One of the members (a male student in his final year) asked me why I wanted to study social work. My reply was "*To help people*". He sniggered politely while all the others remained silent. It dawned on me this was the wrong answer, but I couldn't see what was wrong with it, and still can't. Although it does seem naïve to me looking back, it still seems to me a good enough reason for wanting to get a degree. Certainly, it seemed a more honest thing to want to do.

I do not want to seem too dismissive about the learning and teaching of skills, as I do believe they are an essential part of becoming employable. However, the more important point I am trying to make here is that it is sometimes too easy to divorce the **skills** we learn from the **reasons** for using them. I would argue that it is impossible to assess the efficacy of a skill without viewing it within the context of what is trying to be achieved. This point is something that has kept recurring to me throughout my 37 years of being an educator and an academic. It seems much easier, especially in profession-oriented education, to want to learn how to **do**, as opposed to how to **think** or how to **know** (and to work out what to do on this basis). It is also a great pity that we tend to polarise the two, doing and thinking. They are not mutually exclusive endeavours. To be fair, it is not easy to teach how to integrate the two, but it seems to me that sometimes we give up what is harder to do.

> **Provocation 1:** We opt for teaching and learning that which is more tangible and measurable. We opt to teach the doing and skills, rather than teaching people how to think through the reasons and justifications for *why* and *when* we use *what* skills. This latter focus involves attention to the values we hold, the sorts of people we want to be, how we want to treat each other, and how the processes and structures we create support that vision.

# 'Even the smallest person can make a difference'

This next story illustrates how I came to the realisation that values were paramount.

In the university I studied at, there was an undergraduate curriculum stream called 'general studies'. This meant that all students who were enrolled in professional programmes like social work, engineering, medicine, were required to take one subject from a general studies stream, which mostly included humanities-type subjects. As undergraduate students, we did not welcome this additional burden, as student life tended to involve lurching from one assignment due date to the next. Many of us stayed up all night on the day an assignment was due and handed it in before 9am the next day just to meet the deadlines. I don't believe I retained very much learning at all from churning out these numerous rushed assignments. Ironically however, the most memorable subject I studied in my whole social work programme was from the general studies stream – a subject entitled the '*Literature of Fantasy*'. I became enamoured of Tolkien's work, like a whole generation of readers. There is one small message from *The Lord of the Rings* which has stayed with me ….. **how even the smallest person can make a difference**. This was said by Gandalf the wizard to one of the hobbits. Of course, the story revolves around how the ordinariness of the hobbits contributes to them playing a significant, if not *THE* most significant role, in saving Middle Earth. This idea, of *being able to make a difference, despite how small and insignificant, indeed how marginal, we might be or feel*, has become the crux of my learning from my first studies in higher education, and it has stayed with me throughout my life and career.

Why is this so ironic? Although I studied in a professional programme, the most important learning I took from my early higher education was not about being employable, nor was it from the actual subjects which were aimed at making me employable. I took this learning from a subject which was seen as a 'tack on', but ironically it provided a much more sustainable basis from which to live the rest of my life. It gave me the impetus to follow my ambitions, even though I knew I was a marginal person, coming from a working-class background.

# Banking knowledge or learning how to learn

Another irony was that my mother wanted me to study social work in order to become *employable* but it wasn't so easy to get a job. I might have been *employable*, but in order to become *employed*, there still had to be jobs. In the four years it took me to qualify as a social worker, the jobs had dried up. After moving away from my hometown to do a social work job I didn't like, I eventually found a role as a lecturer at a college (in an industrial town), teaching student welfare workers and police. The challenge here also involved convincing working-class mature age male students that I (younger, female, 'straight off the boat from Vietnam' as they thought) might be able to help them learn something. It was teaching police that I learnt about WOFTAM courses (Waste Of F….ing Time And Money). One part-time male student (a butcher in his day job) actually asked, from the back of the lecture theatre, what I thought I knew that I could teach them. This is the sort of question I have been asked a few times in my career, presumably because of my appearance, the questioner feeling that my own social standing was considerably less than theirs. These questions didn't really worry me, as I felt that they shouldn't really have been about *how much I knew*, but about *how well I could help them learn*. These are two very different things, which at face value don't seem that dissimilar. However, the distinction is key to how we understand education and its ultimate purpose. The first type of learning is about *learning as* imparting information from one person to another … the second is about *learning how to learn*... a much more sustainable skill. The first type of learning is what is commonly termed the 'banking' model of education (Freire, 1972), whereby education is seen as being about acquiring knowledge (the more that can be 'banked' the better). In this approach, the knowledge or expertise is usually lodged with an 'expert' who imparts this knowledge to students who 'bank' it. Knowledge or learning in this sense is a reasonably static phenomenon.

For the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* it was this second type of learning which was the backbone of their success. The question was also not about *how much they knew*, but it was

in constantly learning from their own experience; something about developing determination and courage, about forging on and working it out despite the odds, and it was about giving and earning respect, despite social and physical appearances. Often these qualities were developed in the context of actually having an experience which tested them.

These are some of the qualities I would hope that higher education might at least instil a desire for, if not keep people on the path to developing them. People will experience their lives in many different ways, and will learn different things from these experiences. I believe good education should help people actually learn from whatever the experiences are in a helpful, mediated or intentional way, by helping them learn how to process experiences so that they maximise positive learning from them. This view of education was of course touted by the great John Dewey (1933), and is the basic understanding of reflection, or learning from experience. Additionally, in the process of making positive learning from experience, people should also learn how to be more compassionate and socially responsible (Nussbaum, 1977, citing Socrates). To me this is the ultimate purpose higher education should aspire to. It is also something that I aim to do when teaching critical reflection.

I have just introduced you to the background for my passion for higher education, which is ultimately about how we learn to make a difference in our world, engaging with the human dilemmas that confront us, and using whatever opportunities or talents which happen to come our way. In my own case I have been able to make a career by finding what I think is important, despite whatever beginnings I had. Being 'employable' as a social worker wasn't what I ultimately took from my initial higher education. It was what I learnt about being able to make a difference, despite my marginality, which is what I took from the 'general studies' stream of my undergraduate program of study. This has been the longer lasting learning.

# Learning from uncertainty and ambiguity

I have generally been an 'outsider' in most work situations I have entered. In Australia, my Chinese background was usually a thing of ambivalence. I have worked in Canada, in a small rural province where anyone from elsewhere was an outsider. I have worked in Norway and taught and lectured in many overseas countries, like Sweden, Finland, Greece, Denmark and Mongolia. From these experiences I learnt about understanding the influence of different contexts, and not assuming that my thinking and ways could easily travel into vastly different settings. As an 'outsider' you learn to become aware of and accept different perspectives no matter how nonsensical they seem. Here in the UK, I guess I am seen as Australian, and because I work in disciplines other than my 'home' discipline I am also a little marginal professionally.

These are not reasons to feel sorry for me, or for colleagues who have come through similar or more extreme routes. The issue is to see what higher education has done, and can do, for people like us, but more importantly, for any of us who are 'small' in one way or another. And those who don't consider themselves 'small' or marginal, can actually grow as people through studying in higher education, and connect with, include and learn from the 'small' people. It's not an issue of being just about the 'small' people always trying to fit in, but it is about all of us together developing environments that work for us all.

# What is the right question?

What should be the ultimate purpose of higher education? And what does this all have to do with the current policy preoccupation of employability outcomes for new graduates?

**Provocation 2:** **Should higher education be aimed at educating for employability or for some of these other capacities I have been alluding to? What about educating us to be able to connect better with each other, to make our mark on the world, to have the capacity to make a difference despite the shortcomings of our backgrounds and heritage? And is educating for these capacities mutually exclusive with educating for employability?**

There is plenty of literature which debates these issues (eg Barnett, 1997, 2012; Molesworth et al, 2011), but here I am not rehearsing all the arguments for and against different perspectives. In some ways, these are the wrong sorts of questions to ask, and in some ways I think that couching the debate in terms of employability is missing the point. Of course, higher education should make us employable – we all want jobs, to earn a living, to be socially successful, and to find something meaningful to do. It depends on how broad, deep and far-reaching our vision about employability goes. Employability can't just be about getting jobs (tenuous in a changing and fragile economy), and it isn't just about getting skills that someone wants to pay us for. It must also be about how we grow as human beings, and how we care for each other and our world. And how much we can contribute and make a difference to those around us. It's ironic of course that sometimes these are the very things some people might *NOT* want to pay us to do.

# Has social justice gone out of fashion?

When I moved to the UK 10 years ago, I mentioned 'social justice' in a workshop I conducted. The audience commented that this was 'idealistic', using the term in a derogatory way. Until then I had thought being idealistic was a good thing, just like 'helping people'. It can be too easy to automatically devalue the 'big' issues because they sound too 'visionary' (a term also used to dismiss big ideas), or are not pragmatic or focused enough. And yet when I deliver workshops on critical reflection, and I see practising professionals delving into their own experiences trying to make meaning of them, I also see them becoming re-energised by rediscovering and re-affirming the fundamental values in their lives (Fook, 2017). They find new meaning and purpose in continuing with what often seem thankless or frustrating jobs, by remembering that they wanted to make a difference, to try and make the world a better place. Ironically it often seems to them that these are the very things they can't do, because of the way their work is organised, and the way imperatives are imposed. However, realising and re-affirming these important things gives them new impetus to try different ways, to look afresh and to work afresh.

Carl provides a good example of this. In a workshop of mine, he reflected on a dilemma with his work – he believed that there was some corruption in his management team and he didn't know what to do. He was torn between staying silent about it or 'biting the bullet' and reporting it. After some critical reflection with our group, he became energised to do something about it and wrote to the board of governors. This came as a surprise to all of us, as the workshop had been about helping him reflect on what was important to him, not about telling him what he should do. However, Carl's reflection underscored what his fundamental values meant to him, and so he felt compelled to alert the board. Fortunately, they responded positively, looked into the matter, and as a result several senior people were sacked. Incidentally, as a result of this, Carl decided his true calling was union work and so he resigned his social work position to take up a position in the trade union movement. Carl's story is instructive because it is an example of someone 'speaking

truth to power': asking difficult questions, which allowed him to reconnect with big issues and motivated him to make radical practical changes. The point here is that measuring this outcome in narrow terms of employability is not helpful because it reduces the meaning of the experience for Carl, and therefore is in danger of over simplifying the meaning and impact of possible outcomes from higher education.

Yet perhaps it is still relevant to ask whether Carl's learning did contribute to his employability. Presumably Carl was a better employee in terms of goodness of fit between his values and the sort of job he went on to do. I imagine also that he went to his new job full of idealism, enthusiasm and hope about what he might be able to achieve, about making his small bit of difference. Hopefully these characteristics might ensure that he would be a better employee, able to fulfil his obligations in a creative and caring manner.

For Carl it seems clear that paying attention to his values, addressing what for him were the 'big issues' actually led to practical action, and also to better employability. His was able to act upon his values, to use his skills in a way which supported his own integrity, and at the same time, to make himself more employable.

So this is a plea for not leaving out the big questions: about our fundamental values, about how we achieve goodness of fit between ourselves as unique individuals and the sorts of jobs we train for and take up, about how we make a difference in a world which certainly needs our concerted contributions. Maybe this involves thinking more broadly, deeply and far-reaching about why we participate in higher education, and how we can ensure that the higher education we seek and offer helps people become more employable, but at the same time helps them become better human beings. They are not mutually exclusive. They are in fact intertwined.

# Creating the right environments in higher education

If we do believe that higher education should have an important role in shaping the sorts of people we are, that we can educate our students to care and make a social contribution, and that being employable is part of this but not a substitute for addressing these bigger questions, then a discussion of how we support this in our universities follows. In this next section, I will not dwell on the more obvious options, such as introducing relevant curricula. I want instead to approach the question in terms of thinking about the role of leaders in shaping the culture and total learning environments our universities provide as a context for specific curricula. How then do we create environments in our higher education institutions which can help re-affirm some of these bigger themes?

# Listening and reflecting

If we want to transform the way we think about higher education, and the way we try to enable inclusiveness, then we have to create environments which encourage people to *listen and reflect*. This sounds glib. In this context, by *listening* I mean *not assuming* that you know what someone is talking about, or what their experience is, and not (all the time you are listening) trying to fit what they are saying into your own preconceived ideas. Being open to the fact that there might be experiences you have never imagined, and that even the words and ideas we are commonly used to might not be adequate to capture that particular person's experience or viewpoint, is much harder to do than it sounds. It is odd that some of us, as qualitative researchers in universities, are not better at putting these principles into practice when relating to our own colleagues or students. Elsewhere I have written about the model of critical reflection I have developed as a way of "co-creating the meaning of experience" (Fook, 2011). It is helpful to conceptualise this way of being as *relating to each other as co-researchers*. In other words, the mindset that is helpful for us all to adopt, is that of trying to understand

as much of the other person's experience as if we are researchers, being as open as possible to the possibility that they might be saying something new, or at least speaking about it in a new and different way.

On the other hand, listening properly doesn't mean assuming that what someone else is saying is necessarily 'different' either. All of us from marginal backgrounds know the frustration of what it can feel like being patronised, when assumptions are made on the grounds of skin colour and other characteristics. It is also a fine line between attributing or accepting difference, and engaging in positive prejudice. The trick here is not to assume difference or sameness on the basis of appearances, but to engage with a person and try to understand who they are, from their own perspective and experiences. Of course, this applies to all of the relationships we engage in, in a university, not just to those between people of mainstream backgrounds and people of diverse backgrounds. But so often it is much easier to categorise each other on the basis of superficial appearances, and then to fit every other bit of knowledge we obtain into those pre-conceived categories.

How do we encourage people to *reflect* in higher education institutions? Again, here it is all too easy to be prescriptive. Many programmes now of course teach reflection, critical reflection or reflective practice as a mandatory part of the curriculum (Bradbury et al, 2010). So many higher educators will feel they already do it. But the teaching of reflection as a set part of the curriculum in specific professional programmes is not a pathway to making an institution reflective. For one thing, it is only taught to students. For another, it is often only taught because it is a requirement of a particular professional body. The extent and value of it is therefore quite restricted.

What I am advocating here is that we need to think about how a whole institution might be turned into a reflective environment, or at the very least become an environment which encourages reflection and learning. Although it is arguable that it is not possible to make a whole organisation reflective (Reynolds and Vince, 2004), it may be possible to 'organise reflection' (Vince et al, 2009) within an organisation. There is also a large body of literature about the 'learning organisation' (Argyris and Schon, 1996) in which learning from collective experiences is fed back in a systematic way for organisational change. Fundamentally a learning organisation is one which can incorporate learning from many different sources, and is open to improvement and change. Critical reflection is one type of learning process which could contribute to a learning organisation. This is particularly the case if a critical reflection process is used to help clarify and reaffirm the fundamental values or mission of the organisation (see Fook and Gardner, 2013 for examples of this) as individual people like Carl, who blew the whistle on his managers, did.

Returning to a point I emphasised earlier – that at the end of the day, it is not just about the particular techniques, strategies or skills we use to achieve a purpose, but it is understanding that actual purpose, and the principles which support it, which is also an integral part of the game – the role of critical reflection becomes crucial. What critical reflection in particular is good for is helping to remind us of, and reaffirm, the basic ideas, beliefs and values which underlie what we do. Reminding us of why, and encouraging us to re-examine our reasons and beliefs, is an integral part of education, and was long ago advocated by Dewey (1933).

**Provocation 3: So how do we organise for reflection within an organisation? How do we create and sustain an environment which is open to learning from its own experience and enables workers within it to do so as well?**

How in turn does the sort of learning this entails lead to more ethical and compassionate climates, to cultures which support and embrace diversity, and which foster the bigger picture and a commitment to making a social and global contribution?

# Critical reflection in organisations

A useful concept to employ here is that of the 'hidden curriculum' (Alsubaie, 2015). This refers to the messages which students receive and learn, which are not necessarily spelled out in the stated curriculum. In other words, what is the culture (unspoken beliefs and values) which is supported through the way the curriculum is structured and organised, the behaviour which is modelled and condoned, and the thinking which is encouraged? The problem of course is that the hidden messages are often at odds with what is actually stated, leaving students feeling confused and victimised, as they are easily blamed for not understanding the course requirements, when in fact there might be a gross failure of communication on the part of teaching staff.

The concept of the 'hidden curriculum' is of course referring to the underlying, often hidden culture which develops in learning and teaching environment. It is also a phenomenon which occurs in all different social situations. All social situations have their own hidden culture (system of beliefs, values and behaviours), which is all the more powerful because it is hidden, often inaccessible and therefore inadmissible for examination.

**Provocation 4: What messages are perceived by staff about how they are expected to behave, and about what types of people and thinking are valued or condoned?**

These are the first questions to start with in making change in our universities. They are not easy questions to answer. Often those who wish to answer them in ways which may appear critical of an organisation will not be especially keen to stick their necks out. In many cases it will be those people who are already marginal, or anxious to gain acceptance, who will hold more critical views, but who will feel they have more to lose in speaking out. On the other hand, they may also feel it is useless to speak out, as attempts to do so in the past have not resulted in constructive action. We already know a little about the experience of racialised and ethnic minority staff in universities which supports the idea that a hidden culture of discrimination exists (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013; Fook and Ross, 2016)

Obviously universities need to create cultures, or even small spaces within bigger cultures, which allow diverse groups of staff and students to speak about the hidden (and not so hidden) messages about expectations and values which they receive and how they receive them. Another message that needs to be conveyed is that diverse views are listened to and valued (even if not necessarily agreed with). This is a difficult message to convey with sincerity and is much harder to convey than simply, for example, setting up international festivals on campus. There needs to be a swathe of actions taken, ranging from changes in ways of relating interpersonally to individual staff and students, but also more systematically in paying attention to the way the campus looks and feels from numerous different perspectives. Attention needs also to be paid to having appropriate policies, and of course ensuring that other activities on campus give a consistent message in keeping with these policies. Do policies, practices and cultures all combine to give consistent messages about the valuing of diverse viewpoints and perspectives? Do they remind us that one of the main goals of higher education is to create people and environments that value us as human beings, in all our differences?

These are surely the questions which should underpin the daily decision-making of leaders, and they are a good place to start. The big question for leaders is asking ourselves how our behaviour and practices actually model the messages that we want to communicate in our universities. We can be more mindful of this by paying attention to the

messages that our hidden cultures in our higher educational institutions communicate to each other about how we value each other, especially those who might be different from us, and we can begin to forge more inclusive and caring learning and working environments. Yes of course we also need hard measures to monitor our success in supporting people of diverse backgrounds to attain standing and feel included in our higher education environments. But I suggest that even reviewing our basic practices (management style, institutional strategy, operating processes, research capacity building, curriculum design, teaching delivery, chairing of meetings) needs to be underpinned by a commitment to a critical questioning and reflection upon how and why gaps between policies, practices and experiences exist.

**Provocation 5: What are the more hidden influences which might be inconsistent with our desire to create more inclusive and equitable higher education, and how might we ensure that these hidden influences do not undermine our drive to make higher education a force in forging better societies?**

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