

## **The Betrayal of the Academic Enterprise**

*I argue that the adoption of the business model by universities has caused great damage to the academic enterprise, and a distortion of higher education.*

A couple of decades ago, Western economies were roaring ahead under the influence of what, for convenience, I will call the business model. During these years, financing for higher education as a portion of the public purse decreased, while pressure on universities to increase enrolment increased. Whether or not these stresses were a direct result of the business model (misapplied as it was to many organizations of society and government), the universities fell under its spell, and began to apply it to higher education. The recent economic meltdown has exposed the destructive poverty of the model; unfortunately, the damage done to the academic enterprise lives on.

In the business model, education becomes a product, to be paid for by the consumers (students and their parents), with the corporation (university) being accountable to the shareholders (taxpayers). As in all corporations, the bottom line is financial; the only important question is whether the product increases the economic wellbeing of the shareholders. The design and manufacture of the product are modified as necessary to ensure the continuing consumer satisfaction that supports this financial goal. Ethical considerations, at least until recently, have little influence on the business model. Considerations of cost, not value, determine direction.

Since, in this model, education (the product) has a quantifiable financial value, students (customers) come to expect a solid return (a degree, with good grades) for their financial investment. Undoubtedly this sense of entitlement is a factor in the current tsunami of student cheating. Students and their parents (customers and taxpayers), being persuaded by the model, do not understand the value or the nature of higher education and must focus only on the cost-benefit ratio. In response to consumer dissatisfaction with the increase in cost, and to maintain their market share (enrolment), the universities attempt to make the product more user friendly; courses are reduced in length, (in my faculty, most full-year 26-week courses have been replaced by two more digestible 12-week half-courses and all existing half courses have been shortened from 13 to 12 weeks), and constraints on the awarding of excessive numbers of high grades are relaxed, leading to grade inflation. The nature of the education offered begins to change, and its value decreases as its cost rises.

These problems are a reflection of the changes in political philosophy from social concerns about public wellbeing to “... the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor”, described so well in Tony Judt’s recent *Ill Fares the Land*<sup>1</sup>. Judt argues that the excesses of the 80’s destroyed the political consensus, that, at least in Europe and Canada, favoured public health and transport, and free or subsidized education. So much have university administrators bought into the business model that they have been unwilling or unable to forcefully protest against the devalued understanding of higher education.

Of course, the demand for accountability has had some positive results. Complaints that teaching was undervalued compared to research have finally been addressed. Emphasis on good teaching is now an established part of promotion and salary decisions, and all universities now offer teacher training courses to junior faculty and teaching assistants. Faculty positions where the main responsibility is teaching have been established in the tenure stream.

However, here again, some of these initiatives run counter to an understanding of the nature of education. In an attempt to determine a Canadian quality assurance framework for higher education, the Council of Ministers of Education has recently approved the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents' (OCAV) *Guidelines for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations* (or UUDLEs!). Faculty are required to write detailed "Degree Objectives" and "Learning Outcomes", which are similar to commercial product descriptions or advertising, and are often as unrealizable and immeasurable ("Graduating students will be able to write grammatically correct, clear, and effective prose"). As a list of properties defines a product, a list of Learning Outcomes defines the education that is offered.

The dangerous trouble here is that education is not a product like any other, describable by a finite list of measurable quantities or functions. If education were simply a set of skills, or an accumulation of facts, Learning Outcomes would be definable, measurable, and appropriate. However, the most important results of education are not directly quantifiable. The ineffable delight and magic of learning – creativity, motivation, the joy of discovery, the selfless absorption in a topic, wonder at the universe, self-confidence, the delight of intellectual challenge, the value of dialogue, the excitement of new perspectives, a lifelong quest for knowledge – cannot appear in statements of Learning Outcomes. Since Learning Outcomes now define the course, the course will have none of them.

Education goes beyond the accumulation of information and its application. Education is more process than content, is general rather than specific; it broadens the mind, instills critical thinking, flexibility of approach, and comfort with ambiguity; it eschews black and white solutions or cultural bias. A dollar value cannot be placed on it. Education must be the foundation of every discipline, if that discipline is to have lasting value.

All of this is not to deny that all academic disciplines need a wide and deep layering of content and specific skills, with accompanying standards of competence. However, education is not job training, students are not customers, and education is not a product. Until the universities begin to explain the meaning and defend the value of the education of which they are guardians, they will continue to fail in their central mission.

*Tony Key, Emeritus Professor of Physics.  
August 30, 2010.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, Penguin Press 2010.