Chapter 16

On the Production Line?
Academics in Modernized Universities

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, a modified Delphi study is used to compile and report on the reflective writing and scholarly writing of the authors of this book. Each author was invited to write a brief response to the question, What does it mean to be a knowledge producer in a modernized university? Their responses were collated and the collection of responses was sent to all authors, who were invited to write a more detailed scholarly response. While initial forms of Delphi studies were designed to arrive at consensus within an expert group, the purpose here is to identify and report on both the commonalities and the differences between academics engaged in a diverse variety of forms of knowledge production. What emerges through the writing is a nuanced account of key dilemmas and themes associated with being a research active academic in a modernized university.

INTRODUCTION

This book concludes with a return to debates about the nature and purpose of universities as knowledge producers. A common thread that connects the discourses presented is that universities are public institutions for the social and democratic good. In essence the mission of universities is to act as the critic and conscience of society and for academics as scholarly citizens to foster intellectual insight, contribute to the struggle for justice, take up a level of social responsibility, be passionate about learning and be vocal about the issues of our times. As the collective contributions to this book have mapped, we are at times seduced into thinking that economic imperatives are important; and this includes our contribution to the knowledge society as knowledge producers as well as our role in skilling students for their participation in the global knowledge economy.

We live in unsettling times. Privatization, commodification, deregulation and market forces shape the institutions, the workplace, family life and civic society. There is an emerging vacuum around intellectuals and intellectual life as a powerful public pedagogy that privileges the individual entrepreneurial and acquisitive self is largely unchecked. But, as the various contribu-
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TIONS FROM AUTHORS IN THIS CHAPTER ILLUSTRATE, THERE IS A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL CHANGE. FUNDAMENTALLY, THERE IS RECOGNITION OF THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTION OF THE UNIVERSITY TO CONTINUE TO HOLD POWER AND THE POWERFUL TO ACCOUNT. IN EFFECT, WHAT IS PRESENTED IN THIS CHAPTER IS A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO THE UNDERPINNING THEMES IN THIS BOOK THAT HAS GIVEN RISE TO A LEVEL OF ORGANIZED RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHAT IS OCCURRING IN THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

DELPHI APPROACHES AND THIS STUDY

Delphi studies were first developed in the immediate postwar period in the RAND Corporation to canvass the opinions of experts about likely future scenarios. The methodology developed at that time involved an iterative anonymous process in which the opinions of members of an expert group were obtained by formal questionnaire, and the members of the group were then given feedback about the opinions of their fellows before being invited to respond to a subsequent questionnaire. The process was repeated over several rounds, and culminated in a statistical group response being prepared. The method was designed to allow communication between participants as a replacement for a focus group interview, “to minimize the biasing effects of dominant individuals, of irrelevant communications, and of group pressure towards conformity” (Dalkey, 1969, p. v).

This initial form has come to be known as the classic Delphi method; it has since been modified and used for a range of other purposes such as to encourage collaborative decision-making (Rauch, 1979). Other forms ask the participants to evaluate and predict trends or to create preferable futures. Given the variation of purposes and approaches, it is probably more correct to speak of Delphi approaches, rather than a Delphi technique (Powell, 2003). Broadly, Delphi approaches allow researchers to collect the judgments of experts on a particular topic in order to document and assess those judgments, capture the areas of collective knowledge held by professionals that often may not be verbalized and explored, and to generate new ideas about a topic. Franklin & Hart (2007) suggest that there are three types of Delphi study: the classical Delphi, which is intended to establish facts about a situation, the decision Delphi, which is used to encourage collaborative decision-making, and the policy Delphi, which is intended to generate ideas about a topic. Powell (2003) draws attention to the potential of this approach for harnessing the opinions of a diverse group of experts on practice related problems. A significant benefit of the Delphi approach is that the form encourages a considered response by giving participants time to think and to reflect.

The form used in this research is a variation of the policy Delphi (Franklin & Hart, 2007). The intention here was not to generate consensus, nor to use this study as a mechanism for making decisions. Rather the aim was to generate ideas, to bring forward options and alternative points of view, and to capture areas of collective knowledge held by the authors of the various chapters of this book that may not necessarily be expressed in their formal academic writing. For this reason the initial stimulus was not a questionnaire, but rather a single open-ended question intended to stimulate and provoke rather than to constrain.

The writing was obtained by inviting the authors of the various chapters in this book to write between two hundred and five hundred words in response to the stimulus question “What does it mean to be a knowledge producer in a modernized university?” They were told that the words need not be in referenced academic voice, and that the initial contributions would be circulated without the individual authors being identified. However, it is probable that each individual could have been identified from his or her response, given that the academic concerns of each author are already reflected in his or her chapter. Seven
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