

Re-imagining the university: Developing a capacity to care

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Introduction: The university as a social institution

What contributions do universities make to society? What contributions could they make? As policy decisions in many countries have seen universities move from targeting a selected elite towards educating a substantial proportion of populations, governments have recognised the increased potential of the university to contribute to economic development and prosperity. As a result, contributions of the university through education, research and engagement with the broader society are increasingly presented in terms of knowledge and skills enhancement for economic prosperity. This policy context impacts upon higher education curricula (see, for example, Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001), the research priorities of governments and funding bodies, and forms of engagement between universities and their communities.

However, the economic cost to societies of higher education for larger numbers of citizens, as well as provision of funding for research and community engagement, presents, in turn, a challenge to universities. When the costs of this expansion in

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provision are considered, policymakers commonly attempt to re-coup some of the costs, such as through encouraging recruitment of fee-paying international students and by presenting the benefits of university education primarily in terms of economic gains for the individual. A consequence of the reasoning that university education is an individual benefit is that individuals are expected to make a substantial contribution to funding their education, although there are notable exceptions, especially in some European and middle eastern countries. While the importance of personal economic benefits or public productivity gains cannot be dismissed, such a bifurcation misses the point that the university potentially contributes to *both* individual and collective benefits, for personal *and* for public gain.

Conceiving the purpose of the university in terms of knowledge and skills enhancement has left it open to being coopted within this largely instrumental agenda. While knowledge and skills enhancement is necessary, it sells the university short on achieving a broader contribution it potentially can make—and, in some instances, does make—to society itself. The benefits of university education, research and engagement with society are not limited to economic gains. These benefits also include the provision of services that enable societies to function in our complex world, enhanced awareness and capability, achievement of potential, and enriched social and cultural life. Construing the purpose of the university primarily in economic terms limits a wider contribution it can make as a *social* institution to framing and forming futures.

Despite the prevailing policy context, however, there are currently efforts within universities to overcome a narrowly economic agenda and make a broader

contribution to addressing contemporary issues. These efforts are being made in teaching, research and social engagement, as well as through calls by university leaders. For instance, Steven Schwartz (2010), the Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia has argued for practical wisdom to be featured as a means of broadening the education of university students for the 21st century. In addition, during her installation speech as President of Harvard University in the USA, Drew Faust (2007) argued, as follows:

We are asked to report graduation rates, graduate school admission statistics, scores on standardized tests intended to assess the “value added” of years in college, research dollars, numbers of faculty publications. But such measures cannot themselves capture the achievements, let alone the aspirations of universities.... A university is not about results in the next quarter; it is not even about who a student has become by graduation. It is about learning that molds a lifetime, learning that transmits the heritage of millennia; learning that shapes the future.... Education, research, teaching are always about change—transforming individuals as they learn, transforming the world as our inquiries alter our understanding of it, transforming societies as we see our knowledge translated into policies.

These arguments imply a need to re-consider not only *what* students and staff in universities know or can do, but also *how* we are learning to *be*. In contrast, conceiving the purpose of the university in terms of somewhat narrowly construed knowledge and skills enhancement implies new learning can largely be incorporated

into existing ways of being in the world, rather than contributing to transformation where this is needed.

This chapter argues for re-framing debate about the purpose of the university through a shift in focus from knowledge and skills to possibilities for being, as these relate to higher education, research and engagement with society. A key argument here is that the university has the potential to *open and interrogate possibilities for being*, at individual and collective levels, *in ways that promote attuned responsiveness* to questions and issues in our contemporary world. The remainder of the chapter explores what this might mean for a university of the future.

Re-imagining ourselves in the university: Care for others and things

The current emphasis on knowledge and skills enhancement sees the purpose of the university increasingly defined in terms of outcomes to be achieved when educating students, conducting research and engaging with society beyond the university, in the way that Drew Faust describes above. This emphasis can be clearly seen in accountability measures and associated ‘reward’ mechanisms. Nel Noddings points out that when we value students according to what they achieve, ‘they become resources’ in an instrumental sense (1992, p. 13). The same argument can be made about university staff when they teach and research, as well as when they engage with society in other ways.

Foregrounding readily identifiable achievement and outcomes has become so pervasive in our contemporary world within and without the university that other contributions are at risk of being overlooked or overshadowed. Martin Heidegger (1993/1954) highlighted a similarly instrumental view in the ways in which technologies are increasingly used in human endeavours. He expressed disquiet about the way in which such a view frames human being and nature, as resources to be used and exploited. Heidegger warned of a danger that the pervasiveness of such an instrumental, exploitative view may eventually mean we are unable to understand ourselves in any other way.

In countering such an instrumental view, we can re-imagine the way we understand ourselves, which also enables us to re-frame the idea and purpose of the university. In contrast to an exploitative, technologised understanding of ourselves, Heidegger develops a concept of care, which he regards as a necessary feature of being human (1962/1927, p. 84). His notion of care means concerning ourselves with people and things that matter to us, which includes being absorbed in the various activities, projects and things in our world. It also involves being with others, which can take a range of forms from domination to liberation, although it is often somewhere in between.

Drawing on Heidegger's concept of care and relating it to formal education, Nel Noddings challenges the 'deadly notion that the ... first priority should be intellectual development' (1992, p. 12). Privileging the intellect in this way occurs at the expense of attending to broader features of what it means to be human. Noddings argues for an alternative focus for education upon developing the capacity to care. She argues that

such a focus is not anti-intellectual (p. 19), but ‘if we decide that the capacity to care is as much a mark of personhood as reason or rationality, then we will want to find ways to increase this capacity’ (p. 24). She points out that ‘people have various capacities for caring—that is, for entering into caring relations as well as for attending to objects and ideas’ (p. 18).

In line with Martin Heidegger’s notion, this concept of care includes care for both others and things in our world. Conceiving education in terms of care for others and things turns attention differently towards education. Not only does it feature what students are expected to know and be able to do (an epistemological dimension), but also who students are becoming or, in other words, how they are learning to be (an ontological dimension). For instance, students can be educated to care for ideas, nature and built environments, as well as caring for clients, colleagues and others in encounters with them. As students are educated about how to do this, their learning also contributes to forming and shaping the ways in which they relate to others and things in the world, in other words, who they are becoming as professionals, citizens, persons. In this way, ontology is integrated with epistemology through developing the capacity to care ‘as a mark of personhood.’ Expanding this capacity to care promotes an interweaving of what students know and can do with how they are learning to be, such that neither an epistemological nor an ontological dimension is privileged.

A capacity to care for others and things has relevance not only for education, but also for the research and social engagement in which the university is involved. Similar to educational endeavours, there is a risk that research and engagement with society can be exploitative in a manner that undermines or dominates others and things in our

world. Alternatively, research and social engagement can be directed to caring for ideas, nature and built environments, as well as supporting and enabling achievement of potential in each area of human endeavour. It is important to note that caring for *both* others *and* things are necessary to developing and expressing the capacity to care; one is not an alternative to the other. Care for others and things are demonstrated in what we investigate or promote in our research and engagement with society. They are also expressed in how we carry out these activities and how we relate to others when we do so.

Care for others and things can provide a positive alternative to an instrumental approach that readily leads to exploitation in our world, with its high cost of war between peoples, financial collapse and damage to the environment. For Patricia Huntington, “Heidegger supplies a rich vocabulary for reconceptualizing human nature as care—custodian for what appears—rather than as the rational animal who lords over the earth” (2001, p. 27). Developing the capacity to care is arguably more complex and intellectually challenging than settling for improved rationality or readily measurable outcomes. Indeed, such short-sightedness would not be valued, as we strive for responsible care in our actions and interactions. Importantly, care for others and things can contribute constructively to the natural environment, social organisation and achievement of human potential in ways that strengthen the ethical bases of our societies, as we take responsibility for our ways of being in the world.

Taking responsibility in care for others and things

Inherent in the notion of care for others and things, then, is responsibility. While this is not a feature of care that is explicitly highlighted by Martin Heidegger, taking responsibility for our actions and interactions is implicit in Heidegger's (1962/1927) concept of authenticity (see, for example, Vu & Dall'Alba, 2010), which is closely related to his concept of care. The importance of responsibility is evident in the part that universities play in educating students to be professionals. In some instances, education for responsible practice is a requirement of university programmes, especially where these are overseen or approved by a regulatory body or professional association. But educating students about responsible care arguably extends further, to caring for others and things in all aspects of preparing for life beyond the university. Programmes that prepare students for contributing to society after their university studies, but which undermine or neglect their capacity to care for others and things in our world could hardly be described as educative.

In educating students to care responsibly for others and things in the world, then, we must demonstrate this care convincingly in our encounters with our students and surroundings. These encounters can play a vital role in deepening students' understanding of what it means to care for others and things. As Nel Noddings points out, 'caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors ... or an individual attribute' (1992, p. 17). When we fail to demonstrate the care for others and things that we espouse, students are typically astute in identifying double standards and hypocrisy. At best, our efforts will be undermined; at worst, our students may become skilled in emulating our hypocrisy.

Not only is responsibility of relevance in educating students, but also in our research and engagement with society—which can also have an educative role outwards beyond the university and inwards toward the university. When we take responsibility, the kinds of research and social engagement in which we become involved—as well as the way in which we do so—would place high value on the social and ethical bases for these endeavours. Taking responsibility also entails paying careful attention to the anticipated consequences of our research and engagement for society and the surrounding environment.

If we are concerned to develop the capacity to care for others and things in our world, then the way we teach, research and engage with others outside the university would demonstrate this sense of responsibility. It is important to point out here, however, that taking responsibility does not entail that we “take away ‘care’ from the Other” (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 158). In other words, it does not include controlling or displacing others’ efforts to engage with the people and things that matter to them, such as through indoctrination, exploitation or other forms of domination. Instead, developing the capacity to care for others and things can open possibilities for being, in ways that contribute to framing directions and forming futures.

Opening and interrogating possibilities for being

The introduction to this chapter pointed to a need for a shift in focus in the way the university is currently conceived, from enhancing knowledge and skills to opening

and interrogating possibilities for being. Such a shift is needed across the areas of endeavour within the university, including teaching, research and engagement with society. Although this shift does not mean discarding all current goals and practices, it does involve re-thinking the purpose and character of what we do in the university. A shift in focus from knowledge and skills to possibilities for being can broaden, clarify and give direction to the contribution the university makes as a social institution into the 21st century.

A shift of this kind re-imagines the purpose of the university in a way that no longer primarily looks back: Have the desired knowledge and skills been identified, acquired or applied? Somewhat paradoxically, rapid technological and social change has not yet prompted universities to direct attention forward to an unknowable future, while drawing upon what has been learned from the past. A focus on possibilities for being, however, serves to direct our attention forward: What possibilities have been opened and do they provide a strong basis for addressing both the anticipated and unknown challenges to be faced? In other words, a shift in focus to possibilities for being involves asking what ways of being in the world are opened and supported by the university through higher education, research and engagement with the broader society.

How, then, can the university open possibilities for being? As we experience the familiar in new ways or come into contact with the unfamiliar through education, research or engagement with others, this opens new possibilities, or other ways of being. Similarly, being with others can also extend our possibilities for being through broadening our perspectives. When we call into question and revise taken-for-granted

assumptions or perspectives, other ways of being are made possible. For example, the advent of new technologies, such as the internet, not only challenge our understanding of what it means to communicate but, in some respects at least, also change the way we relate to one another as citizens, researchers, teachers. Similarly, each time that university staff and students travel to vulnerable areas, using their expertise to provide secure housing, reliable sources of clean water or improved literacy and numeracy, new possibilities are opened to those who live in these areas. When students are transformed into historians, biotechnologists or occupational therapists, new ways of being in the world are opened to them. In ways such as these, the university as a social institution contributes to framing and forming futures.

When possibilities are opened, we press ahead into an emergent possibility, thereby negating and foreclosing other possibilities. This is often not an entirely deliberative or rational process, but we actualise one of the available possibilities by enacting it. In this way, individual teachers, students, researchers and support staff press ahead into realising one possibility among several. So, too, do collectives, such as research teams, groups involved in social engagement and whole professions. At times, this can take us in unexpected directions, which once again opens further possibilities.

Opening possibilities always occurs within constraints, however. For instance, transforming students into skilled professionals is constrained in some ways by the practices they seek to enter. The resources that are available affect the scope of engagement with communities outside the university, at least to some extent. New directions in research are necessarily limited by the sophistication of tools and technologies to support the research. At the same time, opening possibilities for some

can mean constraining them for others. For example, awarding funding to one team denies or reduces it for another, in ways that may not always be equitable.

Nonetheless, constraints on opportunities also open their own possibilities, which can lead us to direct our attention and energies in new directions. Moreover, when we scrutinise the way that constraints operate in specific situations, this sometimes opens possibilities about which we were previously unaware.

While the university can create the conditions for new possibilities to emerge through engagement with society, research and higher education, it can play an additional part in discerning what those possibilities might be. For instance, what are the available options for addressing the needs of a specific community beyond the university? What are the possible directions that could further a particular programme of research? In what ways can learning during professional practice be directed to the service function of the profession?

In addition to assisting in the discernment of possibilities, the university can also promote thoughtful interrogation of the appropriateness of various possibilities for charting and sustaining a desired direction. For example, how could a specific community benefit from, or be harmed by, various forms of engagement with the university? What are the strengths and limitations of conducting research within parameters that have been proposed? What are the likely consequences of particular ways of enacting professional practice? To the extent that the university assists in discerning and interrogating available possibilities, to that extent it can enable more informed judgements about how to proceed and why it is valuable to adopt one

approach or course of action over another. It can thereby support the process of pressing ahead in an informed way in line with a desired direction.

Determining a desired direction, in itself, contributes to framing and forming futures. We can simply be carried along with the way things are usually done or fall in with what would most readily advance our own interests. Alternatively, we can continually differentiate a direction for our work through taking a stand on our becoming; on how we are to be with others and things. Indeed, each of us is called to care (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 322). However, who and what we are in ‘the publicity of the everyday world is mercilessly ignored and passed over in the call’, depriving us of our usual means of escape from responding to this call (King, 2001, p. 164). The call to care does not provide us with clarity on how we are to proceed in any given situation. The call ‘is not to tell us *what* we are to *do*, but *how* we are to *be*’ (ibid).

Through a focus on possibilities for being, then, the university can encourage thoughtful—and, at times, courageous—responses to the call to care. It can promote the development of the capacity to care as an integral part of higher education, research and social engagement. In so doing, the university is ideally placed to challenge and support a continuing process of taking a stand on our becoming, on how we are learning to be. For example, educational programmes could regularly prompt students to adopt an informed and critical stance on what they are learning and who they are becoming. A university climate that supports development of the capacity to care would encourage researchers to be ethical in their practice, as well as acutely attuned in their research to potential short- and long-term consequences for society and the surrounding environment. Engagement that contributes to society in

meaningful ways would be fostered and highly valued as a key function of the university.

Through aiding in opening, discerning and interrogating possibilities, then, the university can contribute to framing directions and forming futures, for both individuals and collectives. A focus on possibilities for being can inform us as we enact emergent opportunities in higher education, research and engagement with society. It can also encourage critical reflection about the university's contribution to society and, indeed, about its own purpose.

Promoting attuned responsiveness

When we foreground the contribution the university can make to possibilities for being in a manner that frames and forms futures, responsibility is once again highlighted. Taking seriously our responsibility—literally, our ability to respond—requires that we strive to be attuned to that to which we are responding. Martin Heidegger argues that our very openness to the world is made possible by attunement (1962/1927, p. 176; see King, 2001, pp. 55-59 for elaboration). Through attunement, we are able to respond in ways that are appropriate to the situations we encounter.

Developing attunement requires particular care in attending to others and things in ways that give us insight into their specific conditions and requirements. It entails a yielding; an effort to understand others and things on their own terms. Such attuned dwelling with others and things provides openings for revising taken-for-granted

assumptions and perspectives, so that other ways of understanding, of acting and of being become evident. Attunement with the particulars of a situation allows us to discern possibilities; to posit ways in which things could be otherwise. It also offers a firmer basis on which to make informed judgements about action to be taken or avoided, as well as desired directions in which to move forward. Attunement provides us with ways of proceeding that address the conditions and requirements of the situations we encounter.

Becoming attuned enables us to be responsive to—or choose to be neglectful of—the conditions and needs we encounter as we go about in the world. For example, we can engage with communities beyond the university in identifying how we can assist in addressing their specific requirements and needs. Through our research, we can sharpen our awareness in ways that enable us to respond appropriately to conditions in our world. Our teaching and educational programs can promote a responsiveness which is attuned to each new situation that our students and graduates encounter.

Attuned dwelling with others and things, which enables us to be responsive to their conditions and needs, affords us a basis upon which to challenge and support others in their becoming. In this way, our capacity to care can also be enhanced. Or, failing this, we can impose our own priorities and preferences in our engagement with society, research and teaching in ways that lack responsiveness to need or fail to be attuned with the requirements of particular situations.

A key part the university can play, then, is in promoting and supporting responsiveness that is attuned to the particular conditions and requirements in each situation. In other words, the university can encourage attuned responsiveness to both

others and things in the situations encountered in our contemporary world. Indeed, this is a responsibility the university has acquired by virtue of its social mandate to educate, research and engage with society. Where these endeavours are neither attuned nor responsive to conditions and needs in the situation, their relevance and social contribution is undermined. At the same time, attuned responsiveness requires agency and some degree of autonomy on the part of the university, as well as on the part of those individuals and teams who teach, research and engage with communities beyond the university.

Challenges to promoting possibilities for being

There is currently a range of challenges for the university in promoting possibilities for being that are attuned and responsive to contemporary issues in our world. One of these challenges relates to what Martin Heidegger referred to as human being's 'average everydayness' (1962/1927, p. 69) or, in other words, our tendency simply to allow ourselves to be carried along with the way things are done by those around us. 'Falling in' with others in this way is convenient and necessary for accomplishing our many tasks and projects, but it can run counter to both attunement and responsiveness to others and things in specific situations. As the shift in focus for higher education, research and social engagement that is argued for in this chapter requires attuned responsiveness, average everydayness is not adequate for accomplishing such a shift. Concerted and continuing efforts are necessary to achieve this shift, which amounts to a re-imagining of the purpose and character of what we do in the university.

A second challenge, related to the first, is the current policy context within which universities operate in many countries. As noted, construing the purpose of the university primarily in terms of knowledge and skills enhancement for economic prosperity threatens to limit unduly the way in which we imagine our purpose and ourselves within the university. In order to gain or secure funding, universities commonly fall into line with demands from governments that foster an instrumental focus on readily measurable outcomes when educating students, conducting research and engaging with society. These efforts to obtain funding are often occurring in a context of diminishing funding relative to the costs associated with higher education, research and social engagement. Re-imagining our purpose and ourselves in the university in a way that is not consistent with the current policy context requires courage and leadership. It entails taking a stand in working to educate governments and policymakers about the broader contributions the university can make to society.

A third challenge to achieving a shift in focus to possibilities for being is the difficulty of revising familiar and ingrained ways of understanding, of acting and of being, both within the university and among its stakeholders. Transforming understanding, acting and being entails commitment and risk. Transformations such as these unsettle and potentially threaten our sense of ourselves, even when we are willing to consider making such a shift. However, they can also provide a means by which we can work towards realising a better future.

Despite these challenges, there is cause for hope and optimism. Some efforts within universities indicate that the present path is seen as unduly narrow, such as Steven Schwartz's endeavours to promote practical wisdom and Drew Faust's argument

above that universities have a part to play in transforming individuals, the world and societies. Some of the efforts towards change have resonances with the ideas put forward in this chapter. There is recognition within universities, then, of the need to construe the purpose of the university differently, in line with how we are learning, and encouraging others, to be.

Concluding remarks

While several of the proposals for opening and interrogating possibilities for being identified in this chapter are consistent with some existing and emerging university practices, the purpose of the university is not commonly conceived in terms of possibilities for being. This chapter has argued that the university can make a valuable contribution to addressing questions and issues in our contemporary world through a focus on possibilities for being, at individual and collective levels. This focus has the potential to enhance the ethical bases of our endeavours through promoting care for others and things in tangible ways across higher education, research and social engagement. It would secure a continuing contribution for the university into the 21st century.

A forward-looking focus on possibilities for being would enhance learning from higher education, research and engagement with society, while re-imagining ourselves in the university through care for others and things. Opening and interrogating possibilities for being involves substantial responsibility. In taking seriously our responsibility in framing and forming futures through a focus on possibilities for

being, the university can promote freedom in, and for, becoming. Consistent with a call to care, the chapter has not primarily featured ‘*what* we are to *do*, but *how* we are to *be*.’ More particularly, it has proposed how we can re-envision our purpose and being in the university.

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