Re-thinking the higher education curriculum: Challenges, possibilities, and dreams

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How full of possibilities higher education is today, and yet how difficult it can be for the sector to engage powerfully with the modern world. News of local and international changes and challenges — social, cultural, technological, ecological, professional, political, and economic — confronts us hour by hour. In any given moment, we see another news item, a picture, a tweet, the publication of yet another article; they appear unannounced, fighting for our attention. We hear the voices of the economically privileged cut across one another, polyphonic and unresolved, while other voices are silenced. Arguments about what is ‘fake’ and what is ‘true’ swarm through the airwaves. In the meantime, communities worldwide are in need, sometimes in desperate need, of solutions to their challenges.

My dream, and that of many, is of scholarship that helps individuals and communities cut through the morass of (mis) information and that sets us on an evidence-based path that leads to an increase in ‘the global common good’ (UNESCO 2015). Yet in the crossfire of populism, perpetually changing policies, and the press, that dream seems to be tantalizingly out of reach. How can the higher education sector respond more effectively to contemporary society, in all its kaleidoscopic intensity? More than that, how can it lead the way to a better future? If the impact of higher education on today’s world is to be even greater, we need to re-think student education and its relationship to research. The sector drew traditionally on the Humboldtian principle of the unity of research and teaching, but in higher education

institutions across the world the lived experience of scholars is of two areas of activity not united but divided.

Tackling this division is certainly a challenge. Funding streams, national policies, and institutional structures and processes all forge divisions between the practices of research and student education. These divisions are underpinned by a difference in markers of esteem and reward for those who commit to these two areas; senior prizes and promotions are still orientated predominantly towards research success, with excellence in teaching or educational leadership seen as less prestigious. Education-related activity is even seen as simply administrative or managerial and not academic work (Fung & Gordon 2016), when in fact education (teaching and education-focused leadership) should surely be viewed, as Boyer argued (Boyer 1990), as an area of scholarship that is of equal importance to research and deeply interconnected with it. In addition, we often research and teach from our disciplinary islands, and here is a key area of disconnect between student education and research. Increasingly research is interdisciplinary, addressing complex global challenges using multiple analytical lenses and methodologies, yet students too often study in a narrow field. Alternatively, they study in a range of fields but are not asked explicitly to make critical and creative intellectual connections between those fields, even though challenging them to do so would help prepare them for the multifaceted challenges that lie ahead in the workplace and in life. Another key challenge is that of the distance between higher education institutions and their local and wider communities. Our institutions undertake vital research, and this research provides intellectual arguments, artistic contributions, technological solutions, and professional developments; without these, our communities would be much the poorer. But for many citizens, locally and globally, research is hidden. It is a mystery, mediated perhaps by brief and potentially misleading media reports of the latest developments.

In a recent monograph (Fung 2017), I argue that it is possible to create better synergies between the research undertaken by

universities and students' learning by adopting a Connected Curriculum. We *can* take a series of practical steps that build on the excellent research already underway, enhance the quality of student education, and in doing so increase the impact that higher education has on society. And we can do all this through a joined-up approach that is values-based, directed specifically at making an even greater contribution to good in the world. When designing taught degree programmes, we have traditionally started with a fixed body of knowledge in a particular discipline or field. We have shaped courses around content and then thought about how students can acquire that knowledge. It was as if faculty members held a number of pre-defined items in a mental suitcase, and it was the work of the students to end up with a reasonably similar suitcase full of comparable items of knowledge. Students who were particularly skilled at recalling ideas and facts in timed examinations did well in their degree programmes. In turn, some were to become faculty members of the future, and set out to hand the same suitcase full of knowledge on to the next generation. But instead of thinking of curriculum as primarily a fixed body of content to be taught, we need to see it as all of the learning opportunities and methods available to students today as they study for their degree awards. We can create a series of learning opportunities that are research-rich (Fung, Besters-Dilger & Van der Vaart 2017), engaging students much more richly with research — with its questions and practices as well as with its findings. And this means empowering students to learn through active enquiry and investigation at every level of study, so that they develop vital critical, ethical, and practical skills along with the confidence to apply these in unforeseen contexts.

How in practice can we do this? In our digital world, the possibilities are far more numerous and diverse than they were traditionally. In any given moment, a student can access a range of sources and resources that would have been beyond our imaginings a generation ago. Students can speak to others in real time across national boundaries; they can collaborate in

THE CONNECTED CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

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person or virtually with others who may have quite different skill sets and perspectives. In addition, students can become producers or creators of new communications. One key dimension of the Connected Curriculum framework (see figure) is the use of outward-facing student assessments. This involves assessing student learning through 'real world' communications directed at specified audiences. The forms of these communications can vary: examples include articles, podcasts, video documentaries, blogs, reports, multi-media presentations, and policy papers, but

the possibilities are many. The joy here is that where students are engaging actively in research and enquiry, and where in doing so they are coming to understand the latest research produced by their institutions, they can also communicate the excellence and the findings of that research to their communities. They are able, through a series of collaborations with peers and with more senior scholars in their institutions, to communicate scholarship to the public and even to draw the public into the research sphere to become participants and partners. They can work towards a curated portfolio of outputs in various forms that showcases the best of what they have achieved, telling the story of their investigations, their arguments, their skills, and their values.

How might these dreams be characterized? The first dream entails bringing our diverse, international students into what Angela Brew (2006) calls 'an inclusive scholarly community'. A combination of research-rich learning opportunities and outward-facing student assessments prepares each student for change — changes in the workplace, in society, and in their own careers. But it also promotes collaboration, peer-engagement, mutual respect, and a strong sense of shared endeavour, all of which are so greatly needed in our divisive age. The second is to empower all students, whatever their background, to develop a strong and confident voice. By learning richly through active enquiry from the beginning to the end of their degree programmes, students engage critically with the kaleidoscope of pictures and voices that surround them and confront the importance and limitations of evidence and 'truth'. In doing so, they not only acquire the knowledge, understandings, and skilful practices they need for the future, they also explore and develop their own identities, places, and voices in the academy, in the professions, and in the world. The final dream is that through the artful design of a menu of active learning and assessment activities, we forge stronger connections between higher education and communities. Through the creation of outward-facing communications artefacts directed at real-world audiences, all scholars (students, teachers, professionals, and researchers) develop stronger and

more confident voices; they also learn to listen more, paying even greater attention to local and global perspectives and becoming even more responsive to community needs and challenges. The voices of all scholars, including those traditionally silenced, enrich contemporary debate even more loudly and clearly, contributing to a better future for us all.

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