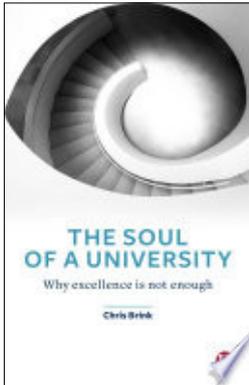




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Why excellence is not enough



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# The civic university and democracy's future

Chris Brink, one of South Africa's leading mathematicians and a major figure in South Africa's educational transformation from apartheid, has written this important book, *The Soul of a University*, which deserves wide discussion among educators, administrators, policymakers, students and the broader public. His argument is that universities need what he calls an 'orthogonal axis' – a focus on what they are 'good for' in addressing the problems of society, in addition to the conventional assessments of what they are 'good at', i.e. disciplinary research. This type of university, which he calls the 'civic university', supports 'challenge-led research...responsive to the challenges faced by civil society, globally, nationally or regionally'. Such responsiveness requires 'civic engagement as another core function of the university', in addition to 'what they are good at' (p. 286).

To develop his case, he describes the rise and then substantial questioning, if not fall, of the 'standard model' of the research university based on the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and emphasising the individual creativity of disciplinary scholars. In the standard model, academics' 'task is to question, their right is to speak, their obligation is to be objective' (p. 42). Brink has a good deal of respect for the task. He also argues that it is radically inadequate to the challenges and potentials of higher education today in societies like South Africa, which face multiplying problems.

By the 1990s, academic leaders on both sides of the Atlantic were discussing the insufficiency of the standard model. In the USA, Ernest Boyer, in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, a prestigious 1990 study for the Carnegie Foundation, proposed that the dominant view of scholarship – disciplinary research assessed by peer-reviewed publications – did not adequately describe the many functions academics need to perform in the modern university, from teaching to interdisciplinary research to engagement with society's problems. In 1994, Michael Gibbons (a theoretical physicist and Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities from 1996 to 2004) and five co-authors issued a report in the same vein, *The New Production of Knowledge* (SAGE Publishing), which addressed the need for a larger view of knowledge production than that of the standard university. 'By contrast with traditional knowledge, which we will call Mode 1, generated within a disciplinary, primarily cognitive context', they called for recognition of a 'Mode 2'. They defined Mode 2 as 'knowledge...created in broader, transdisciplinary social and economic contexts'. Mode 2, they proposed, differs from Mode 1 in a number of respects. It is transdisciplinary rather than disciplinary, heterarchical and transient rather than hierarchical, includes a diverse set of practitioners 'collaborating on a problem defined in a specific and localized context', and is best assessed by social impact (p. 46).

Brink argues that the growing challenge to the standard model was reversed by 'the rise of the rankers', international rankings like the listing of the top 500 universities in the world by Shanghai University in China, first published in 2003, followed by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* listing of the top 200 universities in the world in 2004. In today's highly competitive societies, where everything from football to hairspray is rated on scales from better to worse, rankings became the topic of intense preoccupation. As Brink puts it, 'Universities started taking note because prospective students (and their parents) had started taking note' (p. 55). 'Who's up, who's down, why are they up or down, and what does that say about the state of higher education?' moved to centre stage.

A good deal of *The Soul of a University* challenges the supposedly impartial nature of rankings based on what he calls their 'relentless linearity', as well as their negative impact on society. Linearity, Brink argues, is a way of assessing outcomes which collapses multiple dimensions into a singular continuum. It uses arbitrary measures of excellence that privilege the few and create cultures of managerial control. 'Rankings and league tables, quality as a positional good, meritocracy as rank order of worth, society stratified into classes, hierarchy instead of diversity... are all linear representations [which] compress reality into a rank list in which higher up means better and lower down means worse' (p. 227). Linearity as the singular way to measure excellence, he argues, betrays the soul of the university. His critique of university ranking systems is the finest I have seen.

Brink argues that the standard model sustains a meritocracy based on narrow understandings of 'merit', which serve neither the educational flourishing of diverse students nor the egalitarian goals of a democratic society. Today's incentives encourage the rich and well-connected to game the system, passing on their privileges to their children in ways that exacerbate economic and social inequality.

These are important arguments and Brink has the authority to make them. Over the course of his career, Professor Brink has been a fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, President of the South African Mathematical Society, a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa, and chair of the Advisory Board of the African Institute of Mathematical Sciences. In England, where he served as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Newcastle from 2007 to 2016, he was recognised as an outstanding higher education leader. He served on the Board of the Quality Assurance Agency and the Advisory Committee on Leadership, Governance, and Management of the Higher Education Funding Council.

Especially important for South African audiences, and those abroad concerned with economic and racial equality, Brink has been a leader in making change for more inclusive higher education during the transformations from apartheid. He became Head of the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics of the University of Cape Town in 1995 when the University was experiencing an influx of black students who often had no formal math background. The university was faced with the challenge of equipping them to pass the mathematics modules, mandatory for graduation in science, engineering and commerce curricula. He learned, 'what matters, in terms of both quantity and quality, is not entry but exit...the standard [students] have attained when they leave' (p 157). The mathematics department developed a variety of new pedagogies, from peer learning and the lifting of time limits on exams to a course in basic numeracy.



In 2002, Brink became Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University. He writes, 'How, I wondered, does a university which had been in the forefront of apartheid become an integral part of the new multiracial South Africa?' Vision 2012, developed under his leadership, calls for the university to be 'an active role-player in the development of South African society' with 'a campus culture that welcomes a diversity of people and ideas' (p. 163). He developed impressive ways of measuring excellence that took into account context and students' narrative, not simply grades. Thus, the Rector's 'Rise Up Award', a large cash award, was based on student performance understood in context. 'When opportunity is not equally available to all, then merit cannot just be a number. The narrative, the profile, should also come into consideration.' (p. 167) The award was given at the opening of the academic year, when the vice-chancellor delivers an address to the student communities, including all new students, in the presence of senior academic staff. As each student receiving the award stepped forward, a speaker would give the story of their life and circumstances and how they were able to overcome sometimes daunting obstacles.

It is important to observe that such definitions of merit in higher education are deeply countercultural in modern society. They pose in sustained ways the question of the *ends* of education, not simply the *means* to getting to un-reflected ends. The rankings – like the current fixation on Artificial Intelligence and the Fourth Industrial Revolution – are the outgrowth of long-standing trends which the Black Consciousness scholar Xolela Mangcu has called 'technocratic creep', the spreading control by outside experts. Technocratic creep was anticipated a century ago by Max Weber, who wrote, pessimistically, about what he saw as the inevitable spread of bureaucracy and rationalisation through modern societies, 'the iron cage' (in recent translations, the 'steel carapace') of technical rationality that holds ends as constant and focuses on efficiency of means. Even more evocatively in his lecture 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', Weber described this dynamic of instrumental rationality as 'the polar night of icy darkness'.<sup>1</sup>(p.368) Technocratic cultures, driven by efficiency dynamics, take ends to be a given, whether rankings, winning elections, test scores in lower grades, profits in businesses, or service delivery to citizens conceived as customers. They are accelerated by the digital revolution.

These are international challenges. In 1997, the Kellogg Foundation, an American philanthropy, asked the Center for Democracy and Citizenship which I directed at the University of Minnesota, to assess whether what is called the 'land grant mission' – the civic purpose of what are known

as land grant colleges and universities – could be renewed. Edwin Fogelman, Chair of Political Science at the University, and I interviewed several dozen senior faculty members with distinguished reputations in different fields about their work experiences. We found hidden discontent with the increasingly competitive research culture of the university. Almost all disliked the 'star' system, in which well-known professors seek outside offers to enhance their salaries. They were dismayed about the erosion of cooperative and interdisciplinary work and the devaluation of undergraduate teaching. Most to the point, many expressed anguish about silencing of the discussion of public purpose by the norms of detachment which had come to permeate the university. The Center worked with the Provost of the university, roughly equivalent to a vice chancellor, to create a cross-university Civic Engagement Task Force charged with developing strategies for strengthening the public purpose of scholarship, teaching and other forms of professional work. It generated many innovations. We also came up against the iron grip of the national and international rankings. At one of our symposia we debated the conflict between rankings and civic purpose. Professor Gail Dubrow, Dean of the Graduate School, remarked that the university, if it aspired to greatness, faced a choice between two alternative paths. It could seek to 'play the game' of competing with universities in global ratings (the University of Minnesota is currently 79th in global rankings<sup>2</sup>). Or it could work with other universities and partners in the larger society to change the game.<sup>3,4</sup>

South Africa is a world-class example of the struggle for human freedom with values of the anti-apartheid struggle enshrined in a constitution admired by democracy advocates across the world. It warrants a system of higher education that lives up to this example. It will also take an international movement to change the game. Chris Brink has written a book that contributes to the process.

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