

The Research University: A State of Mind

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It is a great pleasure to be back in Malaysia, and at Universiti Kebangsaan, where a decade ago I spent three consecutive periods, a year apart, in the Law Faculty as a Visiting Professor and External Examiner, conducting research on Islamic law reform in Malaysia, which was then published as a long (100 pages) two-part article in the *American Journal of Comparative Law*—a typical product of a research university.

So, when I speak of the research university as a state of mind I really mean it. Have been at one for more than twenty years, and I even carry it with me, so I had to do a big research project at UKM. That's really typical of the mentality.

The United States has many universities that purport to be research universities. (I will speak only of the United States. The UK system, which I know somewhat, is structured differently, although there is some convergence). But only some are successful in achieving this status.

It is not material resources alone that separates successful ones from others. Money, endowment, cash flow are all necessary, but not sufficient, conditions. You cannot tell by looking at how many large, well-equipped labs a university has, whether it is a research university, and I can think of several very rich universities (with large endowments) from which little serious research emanates—though all faculty have to publish something and most do.

Such universities cannot recruit the academic talent they need, and if they do manage to recruit, some fail to provide the necessary supportive environment. It is that environment—which is all a state of mind—that I want to focus on. It consists of several major elements.

The first is a focus on ideas and on originality. The person who is most highly rewarded (and highly paid) is the innovator—someone who pulls together a disparate stream of studies and shows that they have a common mechanism or thread, or who introduces a wholly new idea that other people gravitate to, or who turns an existing paradigm upside down. (Later I will point out that there are limits to this.) Pedestrian work is frowned upon. And a university or department that is regarded as a bit dead or staid or unexciting will feel it in its reputation.

Now not everyone can do this. So the second thing that is required is a focus on talent, on merit in employment. The major American universities could not have become what they are today had they continued to prefer WASPs in

employment and in student admissions as they did as late as the 1930s-40s and discriminated against racial and religious minorities.

The implication of the focus on talent is that there is competition for it. There is a market in talent. The test is *the outside offer*. If you get one and tell your chair or dean, there are two possible responses: one is "Congratulations; we could never match that; good luck on the move." That is the response a less talented or promising person gets. The other is: "What can we do for you?" Such a person may get a salary increase, a reduced teaching load, a fund to bring in visiting speakers or to provide seed money for research projects, or assistance in setting up a research center or seeking foundation grants for it.

Notice that if you pay everyone the same thing and if everyone has exactly the same duties, you have a problem once a market in talent develops, because people's values in the marketplace may vary. So state universities in the United States have had to adjust to the flexibility that private universities have, and British universities, when they adhered to the civil service model, had problems. They are just now gaining flexibility.

The third principle therefore is inequality based on merit. There is inequality between universities that look equal on the surface and within universities among people who look equal on the surface. This is very confusing for students. This means that the best scholar at university A may not be eligible for appointment at university B. There is an informal hierarchy of universities, of departments within universities, and of faculty members within the same department. Everyone has one vote in faculty meetings, but some people count for more. Some universities have dissonance between external and internal prestige—cosmopolitans versus parochials.

Young people who do not produce highly regarded research—or enough of it (in some fields, that means two books in the six years between appointment and tenure) will not be accorded tenure, which is a lifetime appointment (and we have, by law, no retirement age, much less the very young retirement age of 55).

People who have tenure and who then do not produce publications or who produce works that are no longer in vogue are likely to fall behind in salary and especially in esteem. Their promotion to professor will be slow. And in some universities, they will be permanently—and perhaps demoralized—associate professors. Bear in mind that in the United States, unlike the UK, *professor* is not an exceptional title. The named chair professor is the exceptional one.

Good teaching is held in high esteem at research universities, unless it is regarded as playing to the audience or being an entertainer at the podium, rather than a scholar. But those who devote themselves to teaching or make a fetish of it in a research university will find that their colleagues value their services less highly than they think their services should be valued. And graduate students will avoid them like the plague.

The result is that undergraduate teaching—i.e., large introductory courses—is neglected at many research universities, and much of it is done by post-

graduate students, sometimes well but often poorly. (We do not train people in pedagogy). As you can imagine, this can distress parents, who may pay as much as US\$20,000 or US\$25,000 annually in tuition fees.

The fourth principle—right after inequality among institutions and people that are formally equal but actually not equal—is the obverse equality among people who are formally not equal but actually equal. Here, I mean the equality of peers regardless of formal rank—except that untenured people had better be careful about how far they push it—and between faculty and post-graduate students. In many departments, post-graduate students call professors by their first names, rather than by formally correct titles and surnames.

Faculty members see themselves as training apprentice scholars, not just teaching post-graduate students; and they will involve such students in their research and even co-author publications that come out of it. If a faculty member gives a seminar, a post-graduate student who provides a cogent criticism of some line of argument will be regarded as promising and clever because of that. This happens even as post-graduate students are exploited in teaching and research help.

Now I started out by saying that there is an academic market at work, and I suggested that this market creates, as markets always do, winners and losers. I want to pursue the market idea a bit further.

You may say that this is an oddly American view of the matter, that research universities elsewhere do not follow the market principle, but I think they mostly do—in the sense that, where research universities thrive, the allocation of resources to them is on the basis of some idea of the intellectual merit of what they are doing. In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise, where money is allocated to universities only after their programs are periodically ranked, is an attempt to take a state system and introduce some kind of quasi-market competition into it. I know this, because I was part of it at one UK institution, and I can attest to the ferocious competition it produces. Is it the U.S. culture? I doubt it, because outside universities, (1) no other workplace is as individualistic—most work on the basis of teamwork; (2) nowhere else is there so little accountability; (3) nowhere else do people choose their own work—supervisors assign it; and (4) nowhere else is there such equality of superiors and subordinates. So the university is actually anomalous in American culture.

There are perverse consequences to the academic market. One is grantsmanship. One way to prove excellence is the ability to pull in outside research support from foundations. In medicine, sciences, and engineering, many faculty members are expected more or less to support themselves through the receipt of grants awarded on the basis of competitive applications. Every U.S. university has an office of research grants to provide information on what funds are available externally and help to get them. There are weekly listings. When grants are awarded, researchers buy out their teaching time with some of the money. No one in the university administration approves or disapproves the research (or

attendance at conferences) unless there is some abuse of human subjects. Graduate students participate in order to be trained. There is a culture of research. And everywhere the fact that one received a NSF grant or a Guggenheim fellowship is regarded as an indication of the inclination to instill excellence. My own university receives an enormous sum each year in outside grants, and it is always looking for more. My own current research project has been supported by four different foundations—which, in my case, is a mark of my tremendous inefficiency and inability to get it done in a reasonable time. Only my colleagues are fooled into thinking that four grants means it is a very important project.

The other theme I stressed was focus on ideas and originality. Some implications follow from this, not all of them so happy.

One key implication is that since originality is peculiar to individuals, the research university is the most individualistic and uncoercive work environment of any I can think of. Some sloth and neglect of duties is forgiven in the name of scholarship. Faculty members do what they want, more or less when they want. Another implication is that administrators will not be able to judge the merit of specialized ideas. They are therefore dependent on outside evaluations and on internal faculty governance. Subject to administrative approval, faculty committees within departments and then interdepartmental committees make appointments and tenure decisions. An administrator who reverses more than one or two will be regarded as unduly intrusive and lacking in judgment.

And now the really bad part of the focus on ideas. Since the rewards are loaded in favor of originality, there is much more incentive to produce a new theory than to test an existing one. And so, in some fields—social sciences especially—one new theory follows another, although the newer one may not be better than the older one, and the knowledge being built up is not necessarily cumulative. (I just had to tell a dissertation student not to worry if all she did in her field work was test and confirm [or not] an old theory; she didn't have to replace it with her own).

Now to go from bad to worse, the role of fads and fashions—and the accompanying intolerance. There are many examples of how one view of a field quickly supplanted another and how, soon thereafter, every department at every research university had to have people who espoused that view. In the sciences, where there are generally accepted tests for truth, there is some ability for self-correction when things go off in the wrong direction. However, in other fields, this is less true, witness, *e.g.*, the extent to which literature departments have given up the esthetics and analysis of literature for post-modernist deconstruction and third-rate political studies of oppression.

In the two fields in which I work, there have been some unfortunate developments. In political science, rational choice theory has captured the imagination of a critical mass. Rational choice theory involves assumptions that political actors act rationally to maximize their utility. This makes political science a branch of economics at the very moment economics is discovering behavioral econom-

ics, which involves the study of irrational activity. Rational choice theory would be fine as a *component* of the total discipline, but many of its proponents see it as the only promising approach, and they zealously support other rational choice theorists for appointment and promotion. The irony is that they are excellent at the one thing their theory tells them cannot happen under most conditions: collective action!

In law, there has been in recent decades growing enthusiasm for law and economics, critical legal studies, feminist legal theory, and all sorts of borrowings from other disciplines, and a growing disdain for the analysis of legal doctrine, which has to be close to the core of any legal system. It is said, with a disapproving curl of the lip, that “Professor So-and-So does doctrinal work,” meaning *mere* doctrinal work. Therefore, less and less legal research comes out of law faculties.

One thing is certain: these trends reverse over time. But it does take time, because methodological or theoretical pluralism is a slogan everyone recites, but not everyone really embraces. And so schools of thought entrench themselves at the expense of alternatives.

That brings me to a critical point about research universities: essentially, faculties are engaged in guessing about talent and its future. A few bad decisions, especially tenure decisions, and you have locked in the future. Mediocre faculty do not generally like to appoint people much better than themselves.

This means that it is hard to build up a major research university, but relatively easy to tear one down. The reputations of departments can spiral up when they make a few notable appointments—but how do they break out of old habits and begin to do that?—and those reputations can spiral down when they make a few bad appointments or when outstanding people leave for greener pastures or fail to accept offers extended to them at a faltering university.

Because reputation is so important, all major research universities have departments of external affairs and news services that publicize the great accomplishments of members of the institution. But, over time, truth prevails over propaganda, and the word gets out one way or the other. If the research university is so frail—if it depends on a few decisions or a few mistakes and on the cultivation of a culture of merit and originality, if it really is a state of mind—is there a recipe to cook up a research university?

I do not really know. I do know that academic leadership—of VC., pro-VCs, etc., the people we call provosts and deans—is important, but it is a subtle kind of leadership that is willing to act dramatically to reward merit and protect original ideas, and yet is not heavy handed, so that it gets in the way of the judgments of each discipline. This is diplomacy of the most subtle sort, and many administrators do not have the combination of vision, courage, tact, confidence, and modesty that is required. After all, they typically come from faculty ranks, where these virtues are often in short supply, to say the least.

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So, in the end, it is possible to describe the research university, and novelists like David Lodge have done so with more brilliance and wit than anyone else, but it is not easy to prescribe it. The individuality and competitiveness that are the central parts of such institutions do not flourish naturally everywhere, and therefore many such universities will be more like pearls cultivated by skilled craftsmen than like those found on the ocean floor. Either way, I would rather be there than anywhere else.

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