The University in an Age of Supercomplexity: challenges and possibilities

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This talk

- A survey of the challenges facing universities in the world today
- I shall make a key distinction: between 'complexity' and 'supercomplexity' – the university has to live with both
- Challenges arise both from complexity and supercomplexity
- But also possibilities arise
- The first part of my talk is admittedly somewhat conceptual, in which I lay out the conceptual landscape
- And then I turn to looking at quite practical matters – 6 areas in which the university has major challenges but also options in front of it.
- And I conclude by briefly sketching an idea of my own – 'the ecological university'.

An age of complexity

- What is meant by 'complexity'?
- Several definitions/ perspectives
- In relation to higher education, I take complexity to be:
- - a situation in which the entities involved overwhelm the capacity to handle them
- - this situation is exacerbated when the entities are themselves interacting
- This is the case for institutions of higher education, caught amid globalisation, audit requirements, demands from national agencies,
- This gives rise to a situation of uncertainty and unpredictability.

An age of supercomplexity

- Supercomplexity is that form of complexity when our very frameworks for understanding and engaging with the world are in dispute
- - such that we – personally and in our institutions – no longer have a clear sense of identity or our responsibilities.
- This is a situation of challengeability and contestation.

What is a doctor?- complexity

- Consider what it is to be a doctor
- Doctors are faced with a surfeit of demands that cannot be met within their resources
- Too many patients, too many new drugs, too many new audit requirements, too many new technical techniques, too many papers in the journals to read, too many emails, even too many financial problems (in running a medical practice)
- And these elements interact
- No doctor knows what he or she is going to faced with each day
- This situation – of complexity – gives rise to real stress.

What is a doctor? - supercomplexity

- However, there is a further order of complexity marked by the question:
- 'What is a doctor?'
- No simple answer. Only a multitude of answers, which are multiplying and conflicting
- A doctor is a professional who treats disease, who enhances health, who improves psychological wellbeing, who has auditable skills and competences, who knows much and is all the time expanding their medical knowledge, who acts within an ethical environment, who …
- Different constituencies – governments, pharmaceutical companies, patients, patients' families, the medical profession, … will give different and competing answers to this question ('What is a doctor?')

Complexity and supercomplexity compared

- Both – complexity and supercomplexity – are real but they are profoundly different

- Complexity is a matter of systems and structures, and their dynamic and interwoven character, so producing systems overload

- If doctors had more time, more resources, … many of the challenges of this complexity could be significantly reduced.

- With supercomplexity, on the other hand, there are no such solutions available (to the question 'what is a doctor?')

- There is only endless dispute on the matter.

- Doctors have to live (somehow) with this supercomplex situation, in which society generates only confusion as to what it is to be a doctor …

The complex university

(1) The external environment
eg Sao Paulo State University

- Globalisation (both in general and of higher education and knowledge)
- World leagues tables of universities
- Limited finance
- Demand for student places
- Quality audits
- Competition among Brazilian universities

(2) Internal environment

- 'Conflict of the Faculties' (Kant)
- 27 (?) campuses
- Different access to research funds across departments
- Different kinds of students across the disciplines
- Relationship between teaching and research – problematic
- Challenges of rewarding and motivating academic staff
- Friction between managers and academics

The supercomplex university

- Just what is it to be a university in the twenty-first century?
- What is meant by 'knowledge' – does 'knowledge' *have* to have application in the world?
- What is to be the relationship between the university and society?
- Should the university (just) meet society's expectations or should the university also be autonomous and on occasions critique society?
- Should programmes of study be designed only with employability in mind &/or might they develop students as social and even 'global citizens'?
- Does the dominant consideration in universities – in their management and in their evaluation – have to be that of economy and money or could there be some other dominant criterion?

- NB: *none* of these questions have simple answers; only multiplying & conflicting answers
- This is the *supercomplex* university.

The university in ruins? In crisis?

- In response to this situation, many commentators become unduly pessimistic about the university
- They paint a picture of the university as being a victim of external forces beyond its control
- They use a vocabulary of 'globalisation', 'performativity', 'neoliberalism', and 'marketisation'
- And they suggest that the university has lost its integrity and any sense of its having a unique role in the world
- - and they write books with titles like 'The Crisis of the University' and 'The University in Ruins'

The university as institution – and as idea

- I suggest that the situation – in which the university finds itself around the world - is serious
- In addressing the situation we should first make a fundamental distinction
- This is between the university as institution and the university as idea
- The university is an *institution* in the real world, with all its complexity
- And it is also an idea, or rather multiple and conflicting ideas about itself – this is its supercomplexity
- If the university is to realise its potential, we have to address its situation at both levels, as it is as an institution and as a site of conflicting but multiplying ideas.
- Can we find new ideas that might help the university to go forward?

Structure and agency

- At this point, I want to dwell for a moment on the concepts of structure and agency
- For well over a hundred years, the concepts of structure and agency have been joined together by social scientists in understanding the world
- Giving rise to heated debates
- Are we just creatures of the social structures in which we find ourselves or do we have some autonomy, some 'agency'?

The university as agent

- While there has been some attempt to use this framework to understand issues within the academy, no-one to my knowledge has used it to understand the university as such
- But it has value here
- We can inquire into the structures that act upon the university, and which orient it in certain directions ('generative mechanisms' as Bhaskar calls them)
- But we can also inquire into the *powers* that universities possess
- And if they have powers, they also have *spaces* in which they can make *choices*
- (And if they have powers, spaces and choices, they have *agency*)

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Challenges and spaces:
1   Communication

- Internal
  - Vertical: What communication flows? What levels of understanding – of the daily experiences of academic staff and of students?
  - Horizontal: How easy is it for academics to confer across departments and disciplines? How easy is interdisciplinary work?
  - Managing difference: To what extent is debate encouraged? Are critical voices allowed? Are differences of viewpoint encouraged or subtlely repressed?

- External
  - With which groups and agencies does the university interact?
  - Which kinds of networks does it seek to develop?
  - And for what ends? Financial, political, academic status …?

2   Teaching and Research

- It is often said that 'In our university, we value both teaching and research and they complement each other'
- But now, what do we mean, in a university setting, by 'teaching' and 'research'?
- Further, across the world:
- Policies and strategies are pulling research and teaching apart – and tensions open between research and teaching
- Teaching has come to possess an inferior status ('Professors' gain their titles in virtue of their research activities)
- And across a large multi-faculty university, the relationship between teaching and research will vary from department to department
- This is an area in which the university has powers and choices
- Just what is the relationship to be within a particular university?

3 Corporation and academic freedom

- Another tension
- The university as a tightly managed organization, with its own image, its own market position and its own 'brand'
- And the university as an open space of debate, inquiry, dispute, argument
- So 'academic freedom' is in jeopardy
- But without academic freedom, a university is no longer a 'university'
- And so there is a tension here – which we see being played out in universities across the world
- To what extent, therefore, does a university wish to accord space to its academic staff, to research, to write and to teach but also to speak out in public?

5   Quality

- Just what is to be meant by 'quality'?
- Does it have any meaning?
- Does 'excellence' have any meaning?
- Or are these empty concepts, filled out only by the dominant interests
- - over which there is much dispute
- Depending on the particular 'idea of higher education' that the different groups hold in mind
- Even if we are clear about its meaning, can it (a) be managed, (b) be evaluated?
- The way forward: critical dialogue with course teams to get them critically to reflect on what they are trying to achieve and
- To help them to go on enhancing what they are doing for their students.
- (ie, 'quality enhancement' is a more important concept than 'quality assurance' – for quality cannot be assured)

6   Academic identity

- What is it to be an academic today?
- (*by the way, in several systems in the world today, there are more administrators and managers than there are academics: I wonder why that is and how it might be justified*.)
- Being an academic – again a situation of complexity *& supercomplexity*
- Overload of tasks within a timeframe; but time itself is changing
- Both fast time and short-term time
- Academic work changes – quick work for quick returns.
- As a result, limited horizons
- What of service to others, to one's institution, one's profession, to the wider society and even the world?
- What of the academic as a 'public intellectual' helping to widen the public sphere?

A proposal: the ecological university

- The ecological university is:
- Aware of its connectedness with the world – in various 'ecologies'
- Ecologies of knowledge, social institutions, the economy, culture, and persons
- Is not just networked but takes its networks seriously and seeks to widen them
- Is interested not only in sustaining its ecologies but is concerned to enhance their wellbeing
- Is neither a university in-itself (the research university/ 'ivory tower') nor for-itself ('the entrepreneurial university') but 'for-the-other'
- A university with an *improving* intent, intent on improving the world

Conclusions

- The university of today has major challenges in front of it
- Partly, those challenges arise from the *complex* situation in which the university finds itself – and while there are global similarities, each university has its own set of complexities

- But challenges arise also from the fact that in every situation it faces, there are competing definitions of the situation
- The university has no stable set of concepts through which to understand itself – this is a situation of *supercomplexity*

- But in this very instability – of structures and concepts – there arise opportunities for imaginative actions:
    the university has powers: it is not just the creature of blind external (global) forces
- The university can now realise itself as never before
- And perhaps the idea of *the ecological university* may be helpful here

- But it is up to each university to discover its own possibilities in the world.
- And each university has therefore to discover and to develop its imaginative powers
- And for that, the university have to be an open institution encouraging contributions from all of its staff for new ideas, new ways of reaching out
- Is this at all possible?

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