

The Entrepreneurial University and its Questions*

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In an entrepreneurial university where quantification, evaluation and interdisciplinarity are insisted upon, we need several issues sorted out before embracing the idea.

The phrase ‘marketplace of ideas’, often attached to universities has never perhaps made more sense than in the neoliberal era. Only those ideas that can be sold on the market are deemed worthy of being taught and enunciated in the universities, as a consequence of the neoliberalization of the universities. The jury remains out on the nature and consequences of this shift, of course, but some trends can be seen, especially in the Higher Educational Institutions (HEI’s]) pursuit, encouraged by the government, of ‘world class universities’ status (Nayar 2021).

In a prescient essay on the entrepreneurial university and epigenetics research Clémence Pinel speaks of three ‘multiple scales of environment’ in which ‘authoritative agencies exercise authority: a disciplinary environment with peer-reviewed journals, an institutional environment with research managers, a market environment with funding bodies and commercial firms’. While Pinel’s is a thought-provoking piece, some additional features of such a university can be highlighted for India as well, and in the process these features throw up some questions.

The Data-university

Every HEI submits data, ranging from enrolment to social justice measures, publication record to financials, on a regular basis to the funding agencies – in fact HEIs do so multiple times, so that the collation of data appears more important than anything else in terms of the HEI’s functions and focus-areas.

Data is being increasingly used to determine areas of interest and investment, infrastructure priorities, curriculum designing, student welfare measures. Data is also used to streamline cost-effective solutions. As early as 2015-2016, one survey (KPMG 2016) noted that nearly 42 per cent of American universities use predictive analytics for forecasting trends and 29 per cent for operational and decision-making processes within. As the survey put it:

For their part, college and university administrators are recognizing the great value D[ata]&A[alytics] can provide in helping them support their academic mission. The issue is knowing how to use D&A to realize that value (KPMG 2016).

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Student and Faculty ‘information systems’ are a part of the very infrastructure in many cases. Often made cognate with accountability regimes and the quantification of education systems, bodies such as the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), Research and Development (R&D) and others are driven towards data-collection as never before.

There are two aspects of this data-university that have evoked enough concerns for columns and commentaries in places like *Inside Higher Ed*.

First, the question of data-privacy as articulated by students and faculty. For example, students’ ‘course engagement behaviour data’, collected in some HEIs in the Euro-American system, or their locational data (which parts of the campus they access with their chip-embedded swipe cards) collected by the institution are not ‘neutral’ data even if these are not monetizable. Second, the data collected being employed as a precursor to regulation of student movement and policy-decisions that could adversely impact specific student communities, courses and initiatives.

Take three questions on the matter of data.

What are the policies around data privacy that Indian HEIs have put in place? Are the terms of data collection, sharing and analysis made public? For instance, what happens with student feedback on courses and teachers – are these scrutinized and rectifying measures, if any are needed, put in place to improve the quality of teaching?

Monetizing Knowledge

In ‘The “marketplace of ideas” and the centrality of science to neoliberalism’ Edward Nik-Khah (2017) writes:

The purpose was not merely to produce “more” science, and certainly not to ensure the freedom of the individual scientist to pursue independent inquiry. Instead, it would satisfy the demands of patrons by producing the “right” kind of knowledge.

Thus, competitive research portfolios and funding is based *not* on the alternative models of inquiry for the purpose of broadening the field, but rather on models of inquiry that deliver specific results for the funding agencies (or the market). In many ways, then, research and knowledge-production in the neoliberal era recall older ‘sponsored’ research models. For instance, studies show how the system of royal patronage in the 1570-1620 period in England produced a shift from ‘ostentatious’ to ‘utilitarian’ forms of natural knowledge. This meant that ‘courtly values’ and preferences for these forms determined who the royal court patronised and accepted as ‘knowledgeable’, and what was deemed to be natural knowledge (see Pumfrey and Dawbarn 2004). Previously the royalty and the royal court determined what counted as knowledge, this was later replaced by the patronage and validation by ‘knowledge societies’ like the Royal Society. Even the very style of reporting scientific findings, note commentators of scientists like Robert Boyle, was based on what the Society and its influential patrons wanted to see and read (Hogarth and Witmore 2020). Replace

the Society and the court with the corporates and/or industries of today, and we see pretty much the same patronage system that determines what counts as knowledge.

Driven to such patrons due to the shrinking investment in public education and research, all HEIs and their researchers seek external sources of funding. As a study of four European countries, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Sweden, shows:

...the increased number of actors exercising authority over research goals does not necessarily lead to a greater diversity of interests funding research. A narrowing of goals and frameworks is especially probable when the increasing importance of external project funding is combined with reductions in state financing of universities and public research institutes ... the growing standardisation of project cycle times and resource packages across funding agencies and scientific communities make it more difficult for researchers to pursue projects that deviate from these norms, especially, if they challenge mainstream beliefs and assessment criteria (Whitley, Glāser and Laudel 2018)

As this study noted, when there are ‘no immediate prospect of commercial applications’ and when the ‘scientists were unable to generate publishable experimental results and so ran considerable risks of being regarded as unproductive’, the research was something the scientists did *not* want to embark on. In short, what counted as ‘innovation’ (and which would acquire funding) was determined by the commercial viability of the process and product. This leads, argue Richard Whitley et al (authors of the above study) to a certain standardization. Under these circumstances, the social sciences and humanities, which pride themselves on being distinct from ‘commerce’, and wherein considerable emphasis is laid on ‘alternatives’ whether in development or politics, would find themselves at odds with the mainstream beliefs and assessment. This could be a major factor in the underfunding of research in these fields – simply because what they do is not countable as research at all.

Such patronage demands greater ‘management’, and the R&D offices are now research managers – whose primary function is to codify and present research data so as to attract funders. Research management is not about the quality of research but more about tweaking the quality for the market and the funder. This means, research management is about shifting the goal post: the entrepreneurial university, which is arguably the university of the neoliberal era and the harbinger of things to come, substitutes epistemic potential with commercial potential, to adapt a phrase from Pinel’s essay, in terms of ‘managing research’.

Is research over-regulated and /or is it subject to shifting state, corporate and institutional ideologies and requirements? What is the degree of autonomy available to a researcher in a high-density regulated environment?

Disciplinary Pressures

While the traditional peer-reviewed journal and book publishing model continues to remain the dominant mode of circulating, assessing and validating research findings, the Open Access (OA) model has changed the contours of the game. Journals promoting research articles through the OA mode seeking more citation have projected ease-of-access and citation ([debates](#) continue about the advantages of OA Citation Advantage and the impact of such papers (see Langham-Putrow , Bakker, Riegelman 2021), as opposed to ‘Long Lasting’ papers_(Nagarkar and Gadre 2021)).

The increased emphasis on interdisciplinary research in almost every field has altered the methodologies, venues for publication and the nature of impact as well. More significantly, institutional requirements for *evaluating* such research output have come under pressure. Most commentators agree that interdisciplinary projects should be evaluated in a different mode than disciplinary projects and output. But how exactly this can be done remains unclear.

For commentators in voluminous studies like *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, the evaluation and institutionalization of interdisciplinarity has been a contentious domain. The demand for interdisciplinarity has a concomitant demand: expertise in more than one discipline, combining the expert and the generalist approaches. [Katri Huutoniemi](#) (2017) writes :

Interdisciplinary attributes of proposals and applicants were considered a ‘plus’, but not substitutive for disciplinary markers of quality. Good interdisciplinary proposals successfully combine breadth, parsimony, and soundness ... but to meet these stringent standards researchers have to gain adequacy in several fields .

Huutoniemi also adds that ‘putting a premium on the excellence of disciplinary components does not tell us much about the success of their interplay within an interdisciplinary research effort’. Thus, certain disciplines in the social sciences and humanities may lay greater value upon research questions/topics that contribute to socially transformative and emancipatory results and policy than on disciplinary rigour. They may underscore contextualization of the research and knowledge outcomes – the expectations and values of stakeholders, for example – than the rigour of publications from the research projects.

In an era where quantitative assessment of research determines funding and visibility, even perhaps legitimacy, the emphasis on interdisciplinarity produces more problems for evaluators, given the above. In key aspects, such as scholarly standards, evaluation contexts, policy implications and epistemic assumptions/methods, there is no standardized evaluation model available. And yet there is pressure to conduct and evaluate interdisciplinary research.

The academic questions that are thrown up around the (inter)disciplinary pressures that HEIs work under are many, and I list some here.

How does one evaluate the contributions of different disciplines to the interdisciplinary research project/paper? In an essay on peer reviewing in the age of interdisciplinary research, [Britt Holbrook](#) (2017) observes:

Interdisciplinary research is increasingly encouraged as a way of making academic research more societally relevant ... academic research is also called upon to help societal decision makers craft evidence-based policies, and peer review is the preferred tool for ensuring the integrity and reliability of the research used by decision makers... The key issue for advocates of peer review is whether a tool that has been used mainly to determine academic excellence can be adapted to judge societal relevance without undermining the foundations of knowledge production.

Thus, the tension between academic rigour, integrity and excellence on the one hand, and social relevance and political necessities on the other appear to mark the shift towards interdisciplinarity. Following from the above discussion, we can ask: what criteria may be developed to evaluate different (even opposed) epistemic approaches and/or viewpoints, assuming that different methodologies often valence different qualities, research questions and desired outcomes? What value frameworks need to be evolved to evaluate the quality of a research project whose methodologies emphasise different issues and qualities? Is it possible to evolve epistemological standards *across* different epistemic approaches and viewpoints?

Does a researcher acquire the epistemic, methodological and pedagogic rigour of multiple discipline first, or does this follow the acquisition of the rigour and skills of at least *one* discipline? This question of course emerges from the kinds of studies a researcher engages on from the college level onwards and the kinds of pedagogies in place in the HEIs. Has the teaching – especially in courses titled ‘Research Methodology’ – been interdisciplinary? We do know of cases in literary studies where research supervision is done in languages in which the supervisor has her/himself *no* working knowledge. In such circumstances, would the research be ‘deemed’ interdisciplinary – or should that be inter/multilingual? – without the standard procedure of validation and testing of the student’s work (given that the supervisor does not know the language, how would she/he validate the student’s interpretation of texts and materials?)?

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To play the devil’s advocate for a minute: the questions about interdisciplinarity notwithstanding, the potential for such research to deliver the ‘[public good](#)’ is high, especially in terms of value for larger society and beyond the academia. In fields like Climate Change, interdisciplinary work offers us both academic and socially appealing methods of analysis, data and approaches. In the process, interdisciplinarity might, oddly, be a challenge to the strictly entrepreneurial university. As an example, we can look at the [volume edited by Roy Bhaskar](#) et al. Or, as a policy move, the ‘responsible research and innovation’ (RRI) initiative in Europe has called for and funded research for societal good, and integrating science with policy studies, social sciences and the humanities. In the words of Ann Delgado and Heidrun Am (2018):

RRI builds on previous developments in science policy that revealed the need to engage with sectors of the public in decisions about science technology as early as possible in the scientific research. RRI demands integrating a broad range of stakeholders into research and innovation projects to address societal challenges for which these actors share responsibility.

In an entrepreneurial university where quantification, evaluation and interdisciplinarity are insisted upon, we need several issues sorted out first and questions answered before we begin to understand the nature of the beast unleashed!

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