

The Managerial University and Liberal Arts' Balancing Act

Pramod K. Nayar¹

The managerialism that marks the HEIs has altered the Liberal Arts' perception of itself and the face it presents to the world. Can the academic manager build opinions, policies and decisions about the Liberal Arts in the quantification-driven managerial university?

There is the promise of greater autonomy held out under the *National Education Policy 2020* (NEP), released with much fanfare, considerable uncertainty and some criticism (See *New Education Policy: Reinventing Higher Education?* By Pramod K. Nayar, eSocialSciences). For Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), the promise is, oddly, of *four* verticals in regulatory bodies, in place of the current single one (the University Grants Commission for universities, and All India Council for Technical Education for technology institutes). How exactly this is *less* regulation is anyone's guess. To be sure, the NEP does offer freedom to redesign courses, student electives and credit transfer, multidisciplinary emphases, among others. Internationalization and global-citizenship preparedness are equally emphasized. The pursuit of 'World Class Universities' is on too.

In the midst of all this is the increasing emphasis on *quantifiable* outcomes, *profits* and *numbers* – for everything from student enrolment to patents and publications – by the regulatory and funding bodies. There is considerable pressure to justify not just financial support of public HEIs but their very autonomy (the skirmishes over curricula and syllabi being a case in point). Are such pressures and demands the harbinger of the 'managerial university'? And what is Liberal Arts to do within such a university? The managerialism that marks the HEIs has altered the Liberal Arts' perception of itself and the face it presents to the world. But before we address this theme, a sense of what the managerial university looks like is in order.

The Managerial University

The (over) reliance on ranking and quantification, which troubles many but is here to stay, has induced perforce a seismic shift in the way universities think about themselves. Data-collection, data-analysis and data-presentation – we shall leave out, for now, data-fabrication ! – is integral to the HEI. NIRF, QS, NAAC, UGC, MoE, VIDHWAN, THE...the acronymized list of organizations and platforms for which a university and its faculty have to provide data is lengthening every year. This signals a shift not only towards corporatization with its insistence on quantification and reporting, but also towards a 'managerial university'. This is not a shift in the organizational structure and process alone, but something else too.

The managerial university is embedded in a metrics-based, enumerative and report/survey culture.

¹ Pramod K. Nayar teaches at the Department of English, Central University of Hyderabad. Email: pramodknayar@gmail.com

The American National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE) which puts out annual surveys of careers chosen by students from various disciplines, as well as ‘diversity surveys’, enables students and parents, but also academic managers, to see trends and shifts. The US developed the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH) that explored the link between the ‘field of degree’ with careers, in say, Literature and the Arts or Biology or Public Health. Linked to the Standard Occupational Classification System (SOCS), where each occupation is placed within one of 23 groups and 867 occupations, the OOH “uses those classifications to present information in 324 occupational profiles describing what workers do, their pay, their job outlook, and more”, as the new version from 2018 puts it. These studies showed that the largest number of students opted for graphic design and related arts as career choices after training in them in the colleges and universities. In 2013, Barack Obama proposed that colleges should be rated on parameters such as the percentage of students receiving state aid, average tuition fees, debt, graduate earnings, and advanced degrees. David J. Skorton, President of Cornell, ambivalent about these metrics, stated the case against such a metrics-based move (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/college-presidents-on-obamas-rating-plan/2013/08/30/b3cebc38-10cf-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814_story.html) : “Using graduate earnings as a metric of success is a bad idea because it will predictably lead to a narrower focus on whatever vocational path is timely and topical, at the expense of the liberal education that has been so critical to the success of our nation... .” Skorton was gesturing at the managerialist mode of approaching educational outcomes, particularly in terms of how much a graduate would earn after a degree from an HEI.

First, a managerial university, closely following the trends and requirements of the regulatory and funding bodies, and driven by surveys, reports and statistics such as the above, is almost entirely given over to “management”, of people, resources, output, finances and, of course, data. “Management” implies the increase in numbers of officers and cadres such as Provosts, Deans, and others, with their hierarchies of subordinate officers, whose job is primarily managing for the sake of (supposed) organizational efficiency and output-measurement. Data drives management.

Second, Vice Chancellors and Deans, Provosts and Directors are in the unenviable position of having to be mainly managers rather than academics, even when they have been appointed from within the HEIs themselves. This is so because the quantificatory state entrusts these managers with the job of arithmetical goal-setting that characterizes the academia now: funds released/funds spent, rankings, mapping components where the goals have not been met, numbers for such domains as social diversity or student outcomes, people hired, funds spent on various activities, amounts saved, downsizing and upscaling, etc. The entire enterprise then is marked by a managerial process rather than an academic vision: how many boxes does a Vice Chancellor have to tick annually?

A third, even less happy consequence of the rise of the managerial university, is the rise of the *professional* academic manager. This is the academic who has forgotten academics and has not gone into a classroom (successfully, that is) for years, and whose research output has been in

the basement for a long time now. Benjamin Ginsberg in his gloves-off book, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (2011) enunciates this unpleasant truth:

Even some of the academic deans in recent years have been younger individuals, frustrated in their scholarly efforts, who sought new leases on life in administration. For these individuals a deanship was less an opportunity to serve the school than a potential steppingstone to higher administrative offices.

Ginsberg is describing American universities, but one could look around Indian academia and, to hazard a guess, come to a similar conclusion (since the seniority principle runs supreme in India, and one dare not ask [what the revered selection committee members have themselves published in the last five years!](#)). Ginsberg is even more frank in his appraisal of the new breed of academic managers:

In some instances that have come to light in recent years, administrators have secured the academic credentials needed for their university positions through fraudulent practices... [Even] plagiarism no longer disqualifies anyone from becoming a college president.

Fourth, a professional academic manager is mainly concerned about revenue generation, enrolment and patents, and concomitantly less focused on the teaching and fundamental research (neither of which is, let us admit, *paying*). The increasing emphasis on revenue generation that all HEIs now experience means that the academic manager *has* to find money. All other domains, become subservient to this need and demand.

Fifth, and stemming from the above, measures directed at cost-cutting, a greater emphasis on contractual employment (the US, studies tell us, is now wholly given over to this), revenue models and very different budgetary priorities. Downsizing results invariably in a whole new labour culture, where contract labour is preferred over full-time appointments. This produces what has been termed a ‘gig academy’ by Adrianna Kezar, Tom DePaola, and Daniel T. Scott in *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University* (2019). The gig academy, ostensibly driven by passion and underpaid artistic and other labour, is built on the following contingent:

By implication, under-remuneration and experiential compensation are socially acceptable for this kind of work. Gig work conjures the image of the artist and bohemian, who seeks to remain untethered and therefore free to pursue activities of passion.

The brilliance of this gig academy – an apotheosis of the managerial university – is a ‘fissured workforce’. Kezar et al observe:

Where workers in housing, dining, security, maintenance, landscaping, tech support, and other areas once had a shared claim to the status and rights of university employees, now each of these areas can be staffed separately at a discount using private companies, each with its own distinct (largely part-time or contingent) supply of labor. Because employees work for many different employers, they are separated and constrained in their ability to organize at a scale

that might constitute a threat. Imposed contingency is thus a crucial instrument for managing the workforce mediated through networks of subcontractors.

This is the academic manager's effective cost-cutting and 'management' of the workforce. The spectre of (only) contractual hiring, whether faculty or administrative staff, has begun to stalk all HEIs as posts remain unfilled and lapse for want of teacher-material (or, worse, are filled by those who should never be sent within a mile of a classroom).

Sixth, and from a domain where the academic manager makes her/his presence felt acutely: even course-design and programmes are evaluated in terms of their revenue potential. Naturally, from my perspective, the field that loses out the most in this scheme of things is the Liberal Arts. Does the teaching or research generate revenue, commercialized patents and such? – this becomes the *sine qua non* of the academic manager's vision for the managerial university. To cite Ginsberg once more:

University administrators ... view faculty research mainly as a source of revenue for the institution and are not particularly entranced by its intellectual merits except when commissioning puff pieces for the alumni magazine ... Administrators seek to profit from faculty research in two ways. The first is grant income and overhead; the second is revenue from patents and licenses. The first is the ability of universities to profit from the work of its faculty members and the second is the right of universities to profit from faculty research funded by federal agencies with taxpayer dollars.

Thus, courses that are broadly 'market-driven', such as life-skill courses, become the preferred field for new programmes. Without dismissing the necessity of such courses – anything that improves the employability quotient of the students is welcome – the larger questions are: Should the HEI be setting policies for vocational ('life-skill') courses for which other specialized institutes exist? What kinds of research would then get prioritized and funded from scarce resources? Indeed, commentators have proposed that in the era of "academic capitalism" (the title of Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades' 2004 book (*Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, Johns Hopkins.)

...groups of actors—faculty, students, administrators, and academic professionals... develop new networks ... intermediate between private and public sector, and to expand managerial capacity to supervise new flows of external resources, investment in research infrastructure for the new economy, and investment in infrastructure to market institutions, products, and services to students. Expanded managerial capacity is also directed toward restructuring faculty work to lower instructional costs (although not costs generally).

Can, then, the academic manager build opinions, policies and decisions about the Liberal Arts in such a quantification-driven managerial university?

Liberal Arts in the Managerial University

Assuming all HEIs are moving towards the managerial university model in the neoliberal era, with a greater emphasis on efficiency, quantifiable output, cost-cutting, 'contract-culture' and fissured workforces, what does Liberal Arts do in this context?

For the Liberal Arts, whose outcomes and potential are at best intangible, the managerial university presents a complex, and slippery, field where policies are determined by revenue-possibilities, concrete outcomes and quantifiable yields. Now, in the Liberal Arts, the student is (ought to be) taught not just new approaches in thinking and ethics but called upon to examine the assumptions s/he has grown up with, *unlearn* some of them and redesign new approaches, founded on new thinking about society, the human, the nonhuman and the planet (to take a few contemporary schools of thought). Even textual criticism (I speak from within Literary Studies) that trains a student to explicate a text s/he has already read, from the vantage point of, say Black Lives Matter or MeToo, is a way of making the text resonate with contemporary realities, to ask ethical and critical questions of the text and the context, and in the process disassemble how the student has hitherto approached the text and the realities of the social order it describes. This process involves both skills, critical thinking and ethical judgement.

In the managerial university, the Liberal Arts programmes and its advocates try out a balancing act: between the 'use' value of their programmes and the 'traditional' humanist-public good value. This is also a balancing act between the 'responsible budgeting' managerialism of the enumerative variety and the 'prestige' value of the disciplines.

Liberal Arts embody abstract ideals for managerial universities: they don't just build ivory towers, they reside in them. In the managerial university, the "search for meaning", the quest for the self/soul and other such ideals are bartered, ranted William Deresiewicz of Yale in his *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (2014), for skills in problem-solving, which he saw as "managerial" (incidentally, Deresiewicz who taught English, examines Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for its representation of the "manager"). Frank Donoghue in his *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (2008) would trace this shift that Deresiewicz discusses back to the 1970s in America:

Since the 1970s, we in the humanities have adapted to the conditions of our profession by developing a culture as steeped in the ethos of productivity and salesmanship as any one might encounter in the business world.

This, arguably, is one of the first balancing acts the Liberal Arts has undertaken.

Minnesota State, writes on its career-advice space advising prospective students, embodying the balancing act well:

The value of a liberal arts education goes far beyond its economic value. Graduates understand problems, generate solutions, and communicate those solutions to others. In many ways, a liberal arts education is education for life. It prepares graduates who can adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world.

It turns out that the skills Minnesota speaks of are much sought after. By employers. And projected as such by HEIs in what is surely a 'managerial turn' in presenting the Liberal Arts.

In the process, the rhetoric shifts away from idealisms and abstractions towards something more earthy, so to speak. That is, the Liberal Arts in the major HEIs has quietly realigned and adapted itself to the rhetoric of the market, datafication and ‘usefulness’. As Slaughter and Rhoades put it:

In ...institutions, which advertise an emphasis on liberal arts, the national pattern in the last two decades has been of growth in degree programmes connected to employment in general and business in particular.

Note that, it is employability that is recast as the “public good”, once the foundation for the Humanities programme.

The slow rise of an interest in learning outcomes and ‘fitting’ of the Liberal Arts graduate into a marketable role has generated studies that have enabled accounts such as Minnesota’s. A Report, *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work: Selected Findings from Online Surveys of Business Executives and Hiring Managers* (2018), conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, noted that the majority of employers sought what a Liberal Arts curriculum trains its students in:

The college learning outcomes that both audiences [executives and hiring managers] rate as most important include oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, working independently, self-motivation, written communication, and real-world application of skills and knowledge.

The Minnesota state’s advocacy of the Liberal Arts programmes cited above makes use of the very instruments that at one point sought to diminish or even demolish the field by citing reports such as the above. Lynn Pasquerella writing in the *Harvard Business Review* citing the *Fulfilling the American Dream Report*, concludes : “We need to push back against the narrative that a liberal arts education is ‘useless’. That type of thinking simply doesn’t bear out in the real world”. A decade before Pasquerella, the Council for Independent Colleges published a Report, *Business and the Liberal Arts: Integrating Professional and Liberal Education* (2007). Among the strategies that colleges have tried, says the Report, these stand out:

“blending” liberal arts material (“great Books”) or concerns (attention to writing skills) into their business programmes. Others achieved integration through programmes and practices that went beyond the business major including, in one case, abolishing the major altogether. Several programmes have developed successful ways of reaching out on and off the campus (service learning, “contracting”) or some specific thematic focus (ethics, innovation) as a means of improving preprofessional education in business and achieving the goals of the liberal arts.

Entrepreneurship programmes and the Liberal Arts can work well together, argued Mary Godwyn, sociologist, in an essay for the American Association of University Professors.

The industry, we are told, requires communication skills and ethics – which Liberal Arts will (have to) supply. Transforming traditional disciplinary training into an industry-driven demand-supply training is a balancing act too.

HEIs' managerialism frames the Liberal Arts in specific ways, ways that Liberal Arts adopts in order to survive. When, for example, a private university in India can raise Rs 1100 crore in eight years through 119 individual and 27 corporate founders, according to one report (<https://www.forbesindia.com/article/edtech-special/the-state-of-liberal-arts-education-in-india/67547/1>), enabling it to offer 21 majors and 18 minors in the liberal arts, how does a cash-strapped, heavily regulated public university's liberal arts programmes compete and offer yet another balancing act: between prestige and the market, and demonstrate their *relevance*?

The balancing act *within* the way the Liberal Arts markets (yes!) itself is between two logics, as predicted by George Keller, President of the Maryland University system in his *Academic Strategy* (1983). Keller predicted a shift in Liberal Arts from a social institution logic to an industry logic driven by "a management revolution in higher education" (cited in Donoghue). Should it be efficiency – which includes revenue generation and 'graduate outcome' – or prestige, and are these mutual?

In April 2021, the *Times Higher Education* MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Universities Summit, co-hosted with New York University, Abu Dhabi, focused on post-Covid recovery and the role of the Liberal Arts in the process. *Times Higher Education* (THE) is of course a hugely respected ranking system that all (managerial) universities seek to get into. The fact that THE itself was highlighting the Liberal Arts' role in the post-Covid recovery period says something about how the field is being viewed by protocol-setting organizations that influence managerial universities. And the Liberal Arts view/presentation of itself.

The prestigious School of Oriental and Asian Studies describes the advantages of its undergrad programme in a rhetoric that merges the managerial and the traditional humanistic focus:

Why study BA Global Liberal Arts at SOAS

- We are World Top 50 for Arts & Humanities (QS World University Rankings 2021)
- SOAS is ranked in the top 5 universities in the UK for producing a CEO or Managing Director...
- each year you will take a module from four different tracks. Skills and methods modules teach critical thinking, project design, and research methods. The global track considers the world as a whole, while providing disciplinary training
- the regional track focuses on particular parts of the world, which the fourth track complements, with the study of a language from one of these regions.
- the degree is designed to give you the perspective, specialist knowledge, and skills you need to succeed in a broad range of professions. It will provide the adaptability and flexibility you need in our rapidly changing world

The University of Minnesota did something even more managerial. It created an entire webpage (<https://cla.umn.edu/liberal-arts-expertise-around-covid-19>) around 'Liberal Arts Expertise around Covid-19'. Under this, through a drop-down menu, it hosted 'the stories in which our faculty are bringing their insights and expertise to the benefit of us all during

the COVID-19 pandemic'. Organized around various disciplines, it listed various Covid-related papers, researches and talks of faculty members. Thus, in African American studies, Keith Mayes published a piece on "COVID-19 Is Disproportionately Impacting African Americans". Brenda Child of American Studies published several pieces, including one in the *New York Times*, speaking of pandemics in history, art and medicine, gender and healing. From English, Katherine Schell, from History Erika Lee and William P. Jones wrote several pieces. All of this is prefaced by a statement from their Dean, John Coleman:

The work we do is our strength. The questions we ask, the analytical tools we bring, the perspectives we raise from our various disciplines – that's the heart of how the liberal arts advances our understanding of critical societal issues...Our work is our strength. Nothing we are going through right now changes that in the least.

This is defence at its best, perhaps driven by the fear of redundancy in a post-Covid era. As the world looked towards pharma, biotech, medicine for solutions and palliative measures in the pandemic, Liberal Arts offers the above rationale for its existence, a rationale that combines 'use-value' with the older value of humanist inquiry for its own sake.

Another Liberal Arts response to the managerial university and the pressure to innovate comes in the form of the "transformative humanities" (https://www.academia.edu/44930870/Humanities_and_the_Public_Good), and driven in no small measure by the quest for rankings, enrolment and funds. It is also advocated by engineers and physicists who declare that even their disciplines require a humanities perspective in order to innovate. In their article intriguingly titled "We Need More Renaissance Scientists" for *Forbes*, Julio Ottoni (an engineer) and Mark Mills (a physicist) write:

It is no mystery that science and engineering encourage left-brain activity; logical, rational, analytical, pattern-seeking, solution-solving, sorting, organizing. Innovation, however, requires the attributes of the humanities found in right-brain thinking; creativity, artistry, intuition, symbology, fantasy, emotions.

Innovation demands original thinking and an ability to offer new spins on established ideas, texts and contexts – whether this is the economic history of the English novel or the theatre metaphors in philosophical texts (see Dan Edelstein writing for the Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/how-innovation-taught-humanities-and-knowledge-economy>). Yale-NUS college President Pericles Lewis said in 2014:

Technical education is extremely important for the development of industrial society, but in the post-industrial world, employers value skills such as creativity, the ability to "think outside the box," openness to multiple perspectives; and liberal education fosters these traits.

It is this 'spin', or reading-against-the-grain, that enables Liberal Arts students to start innovating early in their training. And this is precisely what Liberal Arts programmes are now, in the face of the drive to 'innovate', are doing. Commentators observe the rise of cross-disciplines in this pursuit of innovation, notably fields like Liberal Arts and Engineering, or

new fields like 'design thinking' even in India (See <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jobs-careers/unfolding-of-innovation---combining-engineering-and-liberal-arts-161011>).

What emerges from these instances is a major Liberal Arts shift: demonstrating how the skills it imparts is on par with, predates and even surpasses the skills in, say, engineering, because creative thinking, critical thinking, cross-cultural communications and ethical approaches to social problems is the province of the Liberal Arts.

Is it defensive? Is it a case of too little too late?

eSocialSciences