

## **Chapter 6**

### **Community as an academic ethic**

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter will examine the meaning of the word community in the context of the changing relationship between universities and the communities with which they interact. An historical analysis of the university will demonstrate how the meaning of the word community has transmuted over time due, in part, to the impact of commercialisation, as identified by Peter Jarvis in chapter 2. To take up John Strain's challenge in chapter 3, this chapter will also engage with what happens in higher education at a more micro level by reflecting on the meaning of community as an academic ethic. Here, the work of Robert Merton (1973) in identifying "communism" as a scientific norm will be linked to the contemporary life of the academic. As academic citizens (Macfarlane, 2007), academics share their intellectual knowledge with a range of communities including students, peers and the wider public. It will be argued that communism defined as the free

sharing of intellectual knowledge remains a fundamental academic ethic which is being given new life through the World Wide Web despite commercial pressures that have led to greater exploitation of intellectual property rights.

### **Unpicking “Community”**

Community is a word that is much in vogue. It is frequently invoked by leading figures from the world of politics, religion and business in their public pronouncements. They often speak of community as something that has been damaged or lost and, accordingly, needs to be rebuilt or reclaimed in some way. Illustrations given of an erosion or break-down of community include rising levels of voter apathy, deteriorating standards of public behaviour and a loss of trust in public servants (Putnam, 2000; O’Neil, 2002). Targets of criticism in this narrative include the spread of the internet, the decline of parenting skills, and the collective loss of religious faith in many western societies. Nostalgic sentimentalism seeps into examples of this loss, such as the disappearance of the village post office, trusting neighbourhoods where back doors were never locked, or a sense of togetherness or collective goodwill associated with times of (past) national hardship. The modern television soap-opera reinforces this narrative by creating a fictional community that recreates many of the features perceived to have been lost.

However, the notion of loss of community is something more substantial than mere nostalgic sentimentalism. It is about a perception that human relationships have been irrevocably altered by the forces of modernity and industrialisation. This is connected to a shift in the identity and orientation of the individual. The common set of values and beliefs that characterise what Tonnies (2001) described as *gemeinschaft*, a community where large, established associations such as the family or the church are more dominant than individual self-interest have been eroded. *Gemeinschaft* is a less inchoate means of describing what has been lost. Modern society, by contrast, is reflective of *gesellschaft* (Tonnies, 2001) where individual self-interest is more significant than the larger associations to which individuals might belong, such as business organisations. The danger with most dualities, however, is that they tend to simplify and Tonnies' dichotomy is no exception. In the same way, it is also important to disentangle the meaning of community for the modern university from interpretations based on an idealisation of a golden age. Often when this golden age is identified in relation to higher education, it is one characterised by an institutional elitism based on a narrow definition of a liberal education that excluded large swathes of the adult population up until the end of the twentieth century. While internally it might have had the characteristics of *gemeinschaft* this reality also included inequalities

between members of the university community that are incompatible with contemporary standards in respect to equality.

Hence, my first task is to unpick the meaning of community to avoid the pitfalls of assuming a shared understanding or common heritage. One of the challenges in doing so is that community is a much used and (perhaps) abused word. It is an affirmative term, rather than a pejorative one. It implies a sense of togetherness of co-operation, teamwork and, perhaps, collaboration. As an affirmative or “hurrah” word, there is a danger that community can be simply used as part of lazy rhetoric to conjure up positive imagery, part of political posturing by individuals or universities rather than in any more meaningful sense. Similar risks are attached to the use of other affirmative words, such as diversity. To some extent, the use of the word community in a contemporary context has come to replace less fashionable ones, like service. Frequently, the word engagement is added to give us the more action-oriented phrase of “civic and community engagement” (Watson, 2007). This denotes an institution that is taking active steps to interact with rather than stand apart from its communities.

Community is a complex, multi-layered concept. A community can be thought of as something that is internal to the university (that is, university community) or something external that the institution serves in some shape or form through its

activities (for example, regional community). It is also multi-layered in the sense that communities may be seen as operating at local, regional, national and international level from an institutional perspective (see chapter 2 by Jarvis). In defining the communities it serves, the University of Montreal even claims to be “in contact with the whole planet” (Kreber and Mhina, 2007, p.70)! This claim is illustrative of a form of one-upmanship that typifies university rhetoric about community. The multi-layered nature of community means that the university must satisfy a sometimes bewildering number of stakeholders with often vastly different agendas (see the chapter by Barnett in this volume). From a more micro academic perspective, the meaning of communities is also multi-layered and may refer to students, university colleagues, the institution, professional and discipline-based peers, and the wider public (Macfarlane, 2007). Here, the academic has the duties of a citizen in serving the needs of all these communities.

Universities may be thought of as serving communities through forms of engagement. Watson (2007) identifies three such domains. First-order engagement occurs by the university “just being there” (Watson, 2007, p,132). They educate citizens and workers, are custodians of treasures through their museums, libraries and galleries and contribute to social and cultural life through being places which encourage both creativity and adherence to key liberal values, such as tolerance. Second-order engagement refers to the way universities

respond to the social and economic needs of society through the development of graduates in professional and vocational disciplines, and provide research and consultancy services. Finally, Watson identifies the relationship between universities and their members, the academic community, as constituting a third-order engagement. This includes the concept of academic citizenship which will be explored later in this chapter.

Determining which communities universities should serve, or perhaps prioritise, gives rise to questions about the balance between private and public interests. Tight's (2006) analysis of changing understandings of public and private in U.K. higher education is an illustration of the way that the meaning of community has also subtly shifted or transmuted over time. At the time of the Robbins report on U.K. higher education in 1963 universities were seen as essentially independent, self-governing institutions with the right to be supported by public funds. By the time of the publication of the next major report on U.K. higher education (The Dearing report) in 1997, universities were regarded as legitimately subject to increased public oversight and in need of more finance from private sources, including students as fee paying customers (Tight, 2006).

There is a fuzzying divide between the notion of public and private (Urry, 1998) but it is still an important distinction because it can tell us something about which

communities universities should serve. If universities are thought of principally as public institutions then their communities tend to be seen in relation to social missions in widening participation, supporting local communities through access to educational and cultural facilities and training professionals to enter the public services. If, on the other hand, universities are considered primarily private in nature, the idea of community might include more emphasis on economic relationships with private sector employers and for-profit organisations. UK universities are formally independent institutions but are largely dependent on state funding for teaching and research. This raises the fundamental question as to whether universities should primarily define their role in relation to community as building transformational relationships based on a public service ethos or transactional relationships to leverage economic benefits. Transformational relationships are about shaping and re-shaping society through the education of its citizens and other knowledge-based contributions to public understanding. By contrast, a transactional relationship is about the pursuit of organisational self-interest to maximise financial gain. A shift from transformational to transactional purposes characterises the changing role of the university in relation to its communities. This parallels the more general shift in society from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*.

### **The transmutation of meaning**

The changing meaning of community cannot be adequately understood without reference to the history of the university. Here, it is clear that the idea of community has transmuted from medieval to modern times linked to the changing aims of the university. There are a number of distinct traditions that have implications for the meaning of community. In Europe, the early universities were largely concerned with the vocational preparation of young men to enter careers in the church, the law and in medicine although many enjoyed high office and influence without such an education. Universities stood aloof from ordinary society (Dunbabin, 1999). The church played a key role in the establishment of all the original British universities, with the exception of Edinburgh (Robinson, 2005). Nonconformists were effectively debarred from U.K. higher education until the early nineteenth century with the founding of University College London in 1826. Accordingly, the universities trained young men to enter the service of God and, increasingly during the latter nineteenth century, to serve the needs of empire after the Trevelyan reforms of the British civil service.

The idea of community was narrowly configured both internally and externally in the pre-Victorian university. Internally, the university was quasi-monastic: a closely knit and highly regulated self-governing residential community. The organisation of teaching on a collegiate basis meant that community life centred on the colleges. The teacher (rather than research scholar) was a moral tutor and



his role was focused on developing young men with the Christian and gentlemanly attributes fit for serving the church and the empire. This was principally a process of socialisation, in the tradition of Thomas Arnold, rather than about producing learned scholars (Ashby, 1967; Arthur, 2005, Delanty, 2001).

It was not until the emergence of the civic universities, both in the U.K. and the U.S.A., in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century that the idea of community in a modern context was born. This context was modern in the sense that universities founded during this period were formed in response to the industrial age and the demands it brought for a more educated and skilled workforce particularly among the emerging professions. Hence, the civics were to represent a distinctive break with the Oxbridge tradition through championing the needs and aspirations of a much broader constituency of interests. The civic universities, such as Leeds and Birmingham in England or Wisconsin and Nebraska in the United States, were focused on serving the local and regional interests of commerce, industry and agriculture. The founding role of philanthropists, local politicians and businessmen in establishing the civics meant that many had a more practical curriculum breaking the monopoly of classics-cum-mathematics in the Oxbridge mould. Civic universities offered services to their local community such as libraries, museums and public lectures (Jones,

1988). They were instrumental in widening participation bringing opportunities previously denied to women, non-conformists and members of the middle and working classes to obtain a university education (Haldane, 1913). While they were subsequently accused of drifting away from their founding intentions (Barnes, 1996; Wiener, 1981), in the same manner as the polytechnics of the twentieth century (Pratt, 1997), they had, in modern parlance, a strong social justice mission and did much to define the ethical role of the contemporary university in relation to its communities.

While the civics had broadened participation and the role of the university in relation to its communities, a third tradition of the university needs to be considered in the development of its community role. In contrast with the focus on the teaching of a static, classical curriculum in the Oxbridge tradition, German universities following Von Humboldt's model at the University of Berlin, focused on research and graduate study. The role of such institutions was to challenge existing and generate new knowledge rather than teach a gentlemanly disposition. As envisaged by Von Humboldt, the university acted as an intellectual hub or independent think-tank (Delanty, 2001) for new scientific thinking serving the interests of the nation and the state in the process. The German model was quickly adopted in the United States through such institutions as Johns Hopkins University, Stanford, and the universities of Chicago and Michigan at Ann Arbor

(Smith, 1999). The research university built on the concept of community and the work of the civics in responding to mainly local and regional needs by demonstrating how universities could advance scientific thinking and respond to needs at a national and international level.

During the twentieth century, the research tradition has become increasingly influential on a global basis. In many respects, Oxford and Cambridge universities along with other elite institutions, are now more closely modelled on Humboldtian principles than their medieval roots. This has partly been prompted by the way that the modern public university is largely funded by the state rather than the local, industrial and philanthropic interests of the nineteenth century. For example, in the U.K. before the Second World War only a third of university funding came from the state. After its close this figure had risen to two thirds (Scott, 1995). Similarly, in the U.S., there is a long history of funding for university research by central government departments of state such as defence, energy and agriculture (MacFarlane, 1999). While some higher education systems, such as Canada, are more firmly based on provincial or regional governance, the contemporary U.K. university must meet the demands of the state as its principal sponsor. The local and regional community interests that were critical to the founding of the civics have been displaced.

## Shifting expectations

It is clear that the history of the university has created the multi-layered concept of community that exists today. These multiple layers bring, in Barnett's phrase (see chapter 4) "multiple value positions" that require universities to juggle responsibilities to social as well as economic agendas. They are expected to be drivers of domestic economic wealth creation *and* contribute to sustainable development; widen participation *and* compete among the world's elite of research-intensive universities; and maximise fee income from overseas students *and* support the development of higher education in developing nations. To employ another of Barnett's phrases this means that the modern university must cope with "embedded value conflict". It must be all things to all people. The nature of this conflict is probably most clearly demonstrated by expectations that universities will play a significant role in meeting the needs of communities on both an economic and social basis. Here, there has been a discernible shift of expectation.

Perceptions of the public role of the university changed dramatically during the twentieth century. In part, this may be attributed to the massification of higher education systems in many industrialised countries. In a U.K. context, the shift to a more avowedly economic and instrumental definition of community was

signalled by the U.K. “Dearing report” on higher education published in 1997. The report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997, p.72). was explicit that one of the purposes of higher education is “to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels.” The emphasis of the report on the role of universities as wealth creation agents stands in marked contrast with the Robbins report published during the early 1960s (Robbins, 1963).

In the wake of the Dearing report, a number of funding initiatives, collectively known as third leg or third stream have sought to strengthen the engagement of universities with business and enterprise opportunities (Fryer, 2005; Adams and Smith, 2007). The collective effect of third leg funding is that it is now commonplace for U.K. institutions to refer to community and business engagement as their third mission after teaching and research. This is a notably narrower and more economically driven version of community than that founded on Victorian public service. In many respects, the creation of wealth and business competitiveness has come to colonise the civic role of the university (Wedgwood, 2006). The university-community relationship is now characterised by an emphasis on transactional relationships to form economic alliances with private sector organisations and in overseas markets, leverage value from intellectual

property rights and lobby in the interests of the university as a corporate enterprise.

This does not mean, however, that universities are silent about their transformational purposes, as demonstrated by analyses of university mission statements. They provide a place where universities can say something about the values that guide their existence although the authorship of such documents tends to rest almost exclusively in the hands of senior managers and administrators (Davies and Glaister, 1996). University mission statements though have been subject to widespread criticism as artefacts of pomposity and bluster. They can appear to be merely a veneer (Peeke, 1994) and can be self-congratulatory, vague and full of empty platitudes (Carver, 2000; Detomasi, 1995). Many are espoused and run alongside a more instrumentally rational version of community engagement. Such criticism does not mean, though, that they are unworthy of consideration or do not contain strong statements about values. A content analysis of the mission statements of Canadian universities identified twelve predominant values: service, truth, equality, community, spirituality, freedom, human dignity, tradition, justice, leadership, lifelong learning, and learning and development (Kreber and Mhina, 2007). On the basis of rank-ordering these values to determine the priority assigned to them by institutions, Community was ranked fifth. An earlier study of UK universities found that the word “community”

appeared in over forty per cent of mission statements (along with quality, teaching, research, students, and international) (Davies and Glaister, 1996).

In his chapter John Strain (chapter 3) argues that ethics has never been more relevant to the life of the university and indeed flourishes. He contends that evidence of this can be found increasingly in the curricula, particularly within professional and applied courses; as part of the ethics of research; in a broader discourse about the effect of industrial and commercial society on the physical environment and human rights; and through universities being increasingly self-conscious about their own practices evidenced through institution-wide ethics frameworks. The growth of mission and other value statements is, perhaps, part of an increasing self-consciousness about ethical issues. However, the publication of a mission statement or a code of practice for managing ethical responsibilities in universities will do nothing in itself to change patterns of behaviour (CIHE, 2005). Experience from the business sector suggests that codes may simply reinforce conventional morality among members of any organisation or, more worryingly, close down debate altogether (Moore, 2006).

### **Community as an academic ethic**

To gain real engagement with values, and, in the process, strengthen the role of the contemporary university in relation to its communities a code of practice is of limited use. More attention needs to be paid to how the concept of community relates to the work of front-line academics. Analysis of the meaning of community in higher education is normally related to the macro level at which universities espouse their commitment to the types of principles identified in the previous section. What is more rarely explored is what resonance, if any, the notion of community has for the individual working in their capacity as specialists in teaching and research. Arguably, to be a meaningful concept, this is critical to consider.

At the heart of academic endeavour is the desire to share intellectual capital and to advance knowledge. This is essentially what it means to be an academic. It implies a commitment to openness as a member of a collaborative community of scholars. Writing in the early 1940s the American sociologist Robert Merton (1973) identified communism as one of four norms that characterise the behaviour of the scientific or academic community. Merton identified Communism, Universalism, Disinterestedness and Organised Skepticism otherwise known by the acronym CUDOS (Merton, 1942). While Merton referred to the scientific community, this phrase may be taken as a proxy for the broader academic community. It should also be noted that Merton was writing in 1942 before



communism had become a pejorative term or the crimes against humanity committed by Stalin's Soviet regime had become widely known. While the history of the twentieth century means that communism is closely associated with the human rights abuses of totalitarianism regimes it is important to disentangle this political legacy from the ideological meaning of this term. In relation to the academic community, communism is a term that aptly conveys commitment to a shared ethic of scholarly endeavour both to establish and disseminate new knowledge. Merton argued that communism as a norm implied that scientific results should be treated as common property and that a scientist's claim to his intellectual property is limited to the esteem and recognition of priority rather than any monetary gain. Communism is vital for progress in the development of scientific and intellectual knowledge through co-operation and collaboration.

To what extent do the conditions of modern academic life support Merton's ideal? Here, there are contradictory indications. On the negative side universities are becoming increasingly commercialised with publicly funded institutions across the globe, from the U.K. to Japan, encouraged to diversify their income streams. This has led to closer links between business and higher education as the university seeks to forge more transactional relationships. In certain subject areas, especially in the biosciences, private companies are now highly influential in setting the research agenda (Bok, 2003). Commercial sponsors are concerned to

ensure that they maximise financial gain through patents and the establishment of market advantage which means that knowledge is treated as a corporate secret.

This often means that academics are disbarred from sharing, publishing or otherwise disseminating their research findings both during and after a research project.

There are other breaks on the free sharing of new academic knowledge caused by performative pressures on academics. Performativity implies an evaluation of an activity in terms of its economic value and efficiency underpinned by audit and quality control procedures that try to measure good teaching or research (Skelton, 2005). Quality audit of research excellence is now firmly established as a means of determining public university funding allocations in a number of national contexts including Australia and the U.K. This has increased pressures on academics to publish mainly in specialist journals judged to be of high impact and of international standing within the discipline. As a result, there has been a decline in some other forms of publication, notably the writing of textbooks for students and popular, unrefereed articles in magazines and newspapers for peers in professional practice or the wider public (Alderman, 2000). This means that academics are increasingly writing for the benefit of other academics rather than seeking to disseminate their knowledge to broader sets of communities. Audit of research quality is also widely asserted to have damaged commitment to teaching

as academics pursue research and publication opportunities to build their career prospects (Harman, 2000).

On the other hand, opportunities for sharing intellectual knowledge have never been greater. Academics are able to take advantage of the World Wide Web as a tool of communication. Individuals can communicate directly with broader communities through blogs and personal websites making their ideas freely available in the process. This can also extend to teaching materials such as lecture notes, tests, and readings. In 2001, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) decided to make its learning materials freely available through its OpenCourseWare initiative. More than 100 universities across the world, including Johns Hopkins University and Notre Dame, have subsequently followed suit forming a consortium to promote their open courses. Other universities have taken their own initiatives such as the University of California (Berkeley) which posts lectures on the popular 'YouTube' website. By separating their credentializing from their teaching role, universities have the means to take their intellectual ideas to a world audience. The World Wide Web also gives individual academics unprecedented freedom to strengthen their commitment to the norm of communism helping to reach new audiences and form new communities as a result.

Academics serve a series of overlapping communities through their work as scholars. They serve students through varying degrees of responsibility for academic guidance and pastoral care; colleagues through mentoring and support activities in relation to teaching and research; institutions through managerial and representative roles within the university; disciplines or professions via peer reviewing, editing and other organisational functions. They serve the public through the use of scholarly expertise in interacting with the media, business, government, professional and voluntary organisations (Macfarlane, 2007). Much of this work invokes the norm of communism. Despite the pressures on academics, communism remains a strongly espoused value. In a recent survey, 95 per cent of academics expressed support for the idea the sharing of teaching materials with peers and the results of their research in progress (Macfarlane and Cheng, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Universities have always been responsive to their communities in respect to both social and economic needs. From the late nineteenth century they have been about a lot more than producing an educated man in the liberal education tradition.

To reject the broader economic role of higher education as part of its compact with society would be to misread the history of higher education and romanticise the extent to which universities were ever insulated from the commercial and political forces of their day. There is evidence though that the balance between social and economic purposes appears to have shifted in recent years as the community mission is increasingly redefined in terms of income generation via transactional relationships.

What has tended to be overlooked in the re-orientation of the civic purposes of the university is the link between macro level policy statements and the identity and motivation of academic practitioners. Without making this connection, and incorporating some fundamental changes in the way that academics are recognised and rewarded for this work, it is unlikely that the more ambitious visions of university community engagement will be realised. In short, community needs to be accompanied by an academic ethic of which communism is a key element.

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