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From 'priceless' to 'priced': the value of knowledge in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a shift in the value awarded to the disciplinary knowledge developed in universities. The instrumentalised function of this type of knowledge as it is 'priced' and sold in the global higher education marketplace is given a value greater than that given to its symbolic or 'priceless' function in contributing to society's social meanings. This shift in value is the result of the intensive commodification of knowledge in the higher education sector itself as a consequence of fundamental changes to the global economy. Knowledge now plays a central role as a valuable productive force in the global economy and higher education is the main site for its production and sale. The weakened insularity between disciplinary knowledge's symbolic and economic functions gives greater value to its 'price' rather than to its 'priceless' function as a creative force in creating the social meaning of the symbolic sphere of human life. We describe the way this shift in the value of disciplinary knowledge has affected its functions in the 'knowledge economy' era with reference to an empirical study of the internationalisation of Indonesian higher education.

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Introduction

In the past three decades, universities in both developed and developing countries such as Indonesia (Sakhiyya 2018) have adopted similar approaches to reforming higher education. These reforms are characterised by three interdependent strategies: privatisation, marketisation, and internationalisation. They enact the widespread expansion of what has been known since the turn of the century as the 'global knowledge economy' (Yang 2002; Olssen and Peters 2005; Singh 2010; Robertson and Dale 2013; Rizvi 2016; Shore and Wright 2017). In this meta-narrative, 'knowledge' is the engine of development. It is the 'core business' of universities with the higher education sector positioned as the prime motor for a nation's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Robertson and Keeling 2008). While there are many research studies exploring the relationship between higher education and the knowledge economy, fewer focus on what happens to the social meaning of knowledge itself (Young 2008; Beck 2010; Wheelahan 2012; Moutsios 2018). Throughout the paper we refer to an empirical study of the internationalisation of Indonesian higher education to illustrate our argument that a shift to how knowledge is valued has occurred within the context of the global knowledge economy.

We begin by identifying two main functions of the disciplinary knowledge that is developed in universities. (Several terms are used for this type of knowledge, including 'disciplinary', 'scientific', 'philosophical', 'abstract', and 'rational' in order to distinguish it from the everyday knowledge of

experience [Durkheim 1912/2001; Rata 2012]). First, this type of knowledge serves as a symbolic resource for modern society by contributing to the collective representations (Durkheim 1912/2001) or imaginary significations (Castoriadis 1987) that comprise social meaning in pluralist collectivities (Rata 2018). As ‘the instrument of thought and the means of communication’ (Durkheim, cited in Bourdieu 1979, 79) rationalised knowledge serves to individualise and socialise in creating the modern shared reality. Bourdieu (1979) used the term ‘consensus’ for this shared reality, saying that collective symbolic representations ‘make possible the *consensus* on the sense of the social world which makes a fundamental contribution towards reproducing the social world’ (p. 79, emphasis in the original). This is the national imaginary of the modern nation-state which seeks to replace the mythologies which played the same cohesive function in creating the shared reality of traditional social groups (Anderson 1983; Rata 2018). But disciplinary knowledge also has a second function, one which is located in its form as technological ‘know how’ (Ryle 1949; Winch 2014, 2017). This form refers to applied or procedural knowledge which enables the propositional form (knowledge-that) of disciplinary knowledge to be developed as the technologies for its instrumentalisation.

We argue that the relative weighting between the symbolic and instrumentalised functions of disciplinary knowledge appears to be shifting in favour of instrumentatisation, that is, of knowledge’s economic function; hence our term ‘from priceless to priced’ as a metaphor for this shift in value. However, we argue that the power inherent in symbolic knowledge as the source of society’s ‘shared reality’ will continue to challenge the narrowing of knowledge to its instrumental use-value. This is the case because those collective representations are created by humans, and in that very process, create us as both individuals (the instruments of thought) and as members of society (the means of communicating that thought) (Bourdieu 1979; Durkheim 1912/2001; Moutsios 2018). The symbolic sphere is the social sphere. It is what makes us social beings and that is the source and meaning of its strength. Throughout the paper we refer to Author 1’s study of higher education policy in Indonesia to illustrate the argument that a weakened insularity (Bernstein 2000) between disciplinary knowledge’s symbolic and economic functions is putting pressure on the value of that type of knowledge, to give greater value to its ‘price’ rather than to its ‘priceless’ function as a creative force in creating the social meaning of the symbolic sphere in modern pluralist societies.

Knowledge

Emile Durkheim used the terms ‘sacred and profane’ (1912/2001, 36) to theorise a fundamental distinction between ‘the “sacred”, as an internally consistent world of concepts and the “profane” as a vague and contradictory continuum of procedures and practices.’ (Young and Muller 2013, in Rata 2018, 2). Basil Bernstein (2000), following in Durkheim’s intellectual tradition, extended the idea of knowledge differentiation by theorising an insulation or boundary separating the two forms. These forms are conceptual (i.e., propositional or symbolic) knowledge on the one hand and procedural or applied knowledge on the other (Bernstein 2000; Moore 2013). This overcame the tendency for Durkheim’s original dyad of the sacred and the profane to present as a polarised binary.

According to Beck (2010), it was Bernstein who appropriated the sacred/profane distinction and took it further to recognise the functions of knowledge in relation to *the degree of insulation* between knowledge’s propositional or symbolic form and its instrumentalised form. More recently, Winch (2014, 2017), building on the ideas of Ryle (1949) has further developed the concepts of ‘knowledge-that’ and ‘knowledge-how’ to further identify the nature of the propositional-procedural knowledge distinction and to theorise the connection between the two forms of knowledge within the disciplinary knowledge type. However, our purpose is confined to examining how the value awarded to either form of knowledge alters as the insulation between symbolic and instrumentalised knowledge shifts. In turn the shift is the result of which knowledge function is valued more higher; knowledge’s function as the means by which the symbolic sphere of social meaning is created, or knowledge’s function as an instrument for the globalised economy.

Bernstein (2000) conceptualises the relationship between these two forms as an insulation or boundary acting to shore up the two forms so that they could be classified in terms of their difference. Insulation, as Beck (2010, 86) defines it, is a 'strong classification between education and production'. This means that, when the insulation is strong, there is a clear boundary between the symbolic and instrumental forms of knowledge. This enables 'the real autonomy of education' (Beck 2010, 86) from economic forces. When the insulation is weakened, or the boundary is blurred, as has been the case in recent decades, the symbolic function of knowledge declines while the instrumental function of knowledge begins to dominate. In contrast, when the boundary between the two spheres remains strong, market conditions have less power to dictate the orientation of higher education and the humanising principle ascribed to the creation of knowledge would retain its value (Bernstein 2000).

The advantage of Durkheim's theory of knowledge differentiation, and its refinement by Bernstein is that it breaks the impasse found in Marxist writers such as Althusser (1971), where all knowledge is considered to be ideology. The reduction of the symbolic sphere (or the superstructure in Marxist discourse) to political ideology is continued in the Foucauldian notion of knowledge/power (Foucault 2001). 'Knowledge/power' captures that reduction of knowledge to power in the conflation of the term. The same idea emerged in the new sociology of education in the 1970s (Young 1971) and maintains a strong influence despite a challenge in the past decade by Durkheimian inspired 'social realists' (Maton and Moore 2010; Barrett and Rata 2014; Barrett, Hoadley, and Morgan 2017) (with Michael Young playing a leading role in both movements [Young 2008]). Indeed the use of the opposing phrases, 'the knowledge of the powerful,' where knowledge *is* ideology, and 'powerful knowledge,' where knowledge *is* power are from Young and other social realist writers (Young 2008; Young and Muller 2013; Beck 2014).

Our use of Durkheim and Bernstein is a deliberate rejection of knowledge reductionism. Instead we accept the potential for degrees of autonomy between the symbolic and economic spheres of human activity while, at the same time, recognising the potential of knowledge to be ideology when the economic sphere has greater influence. However, in taking a social realist view, we recognise that symbolic knowledge also has the potential to be powerful knowledge; that is knowledge which 'interrupts' power as much as it has the potential to be knowledge of the powerful. Indeed, Rob Moore's (2013) account of Bernstein highlights the potential of such knowledge to interrupt; that is to recognise 'the principles and possibilities of disordering and disruption, of the structuring of change' (p. 37).

By drawing on Bernstein's concept of the degree of insulation or boundary between the symbolic and instrumental functions of knowledge, we explore this interruption (Moore 2013) potential at work in higher education today. Given the central role of knowledge as a productive force in late capitalism, it is in the higher education sector, particularly in universities and research institutes where knowledge is created, that the strain at the boundary's edge is most visible. The increasing dominance in universities of the economic discourse of privatisation, marketisation, and internationalisation as is occurring in Indonesia's higher education policies (Sakhiyya 2018) certainly suggests that the insularity between the two forms and functions of knowledge is weakening and that knowledge has a high price for sale in the global market. In the study of internationalisation in Indonesia for example, it became clear that the pressure on academics to publish in high ranking journals was in order for the university to be recognised as a 'player' in the market. In this way the increasing 'price' of knowledge in the competitive economy explains the ways in which the Indonesian universities studied were behaving increasingly as businesses with all the accompanying discourse of 'management,' 'accountability,' and 'performance.'

One example from the many studies (Young 2008; Beck 2010; Wheelahan 2012) which identify this weakening of the classification boundary between knowledge's symbolic and instrumental forms and the subsequent mix of the two is the analysis by Chris Corbel (2014) of the 'knowledge and skills' dyad in Australian higher education. Corbel provides a vivid illustration of how the weakened insularity leads to a conflation of the two separate concepts into the one term. His analysis of vocational

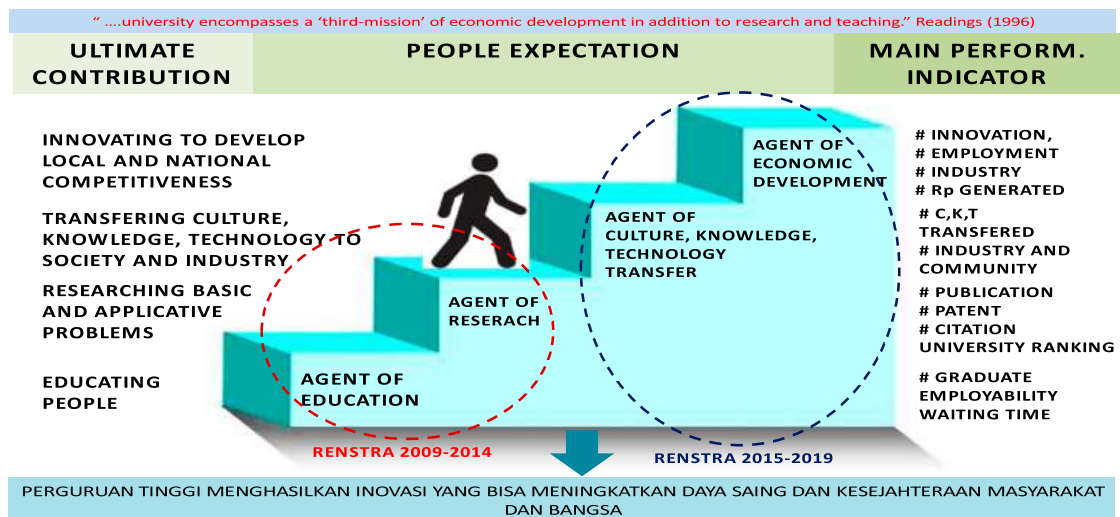


Figure 1. The Shift of Knowledge in Indonesian Higher Education. Source: Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Research and Technology and Higher Education 2015–2019, p. 11

policy shows the term ‘skills’ increasing taking precedence, and in some cases actually replacing the word ‘knowledge’. The Indonesian study showed the same trend. The current policy documents of Indonesian higher education provide insights into this shift. As an illustration, the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Research and Technology and Higher Education 2015–2019 considers ‘higher education as the agent of economic development’ (2015, 11). This is despite its reference to the National Constitution in the document that secures ‘the rights of every citizen to access education’ (2015, 1). The development of a universal national education system and its extension to higher education in the post-Independence era is part of Indonesia’s aim to create a modern pluralist society, one uniting numerous historically separate social groups. However, the main performance indicators of the Strategic Plan, such as innovation, employment, industry, and university ranking show a shift to the role of the education system, certainly with respect to the higher education sector. The ultimate contribution of this Strategic Plan is to ‘generate innovation that is able to leverage the nation’s competitiveness and welfare’ (2015, 11). The diagram below is taken from the Strategic Plan which visualises this economic development mission (Figure 1).

The social origins of knowledge

Both the symbolic and instrumental functions of disciplinary knowledge have social origins, something which helps to explain their potential for conflation, that is, for the weakened insularity we describe earlier. Durkheim’s (1912/2001) ‘social origin of the categories of thought’ (p. 17) is the main premise for his sociality of knowledge and for his recognition that rationalised knowledge can be separated (i.e., abstracted) from its social context (Moore 2013; Rata 2018). It is in ‘the form of the abstraction’ (Bernstein 2000, 29) that each type of knowledge has to the material context that alters the function of knowledge. When economic forces are stronger, as in the post-1970s’ decades, the degree of abstraction is lessened. This prescient idea does, in fact, allow us to locate instrumentalised knowledge’s growing strength in the very closeness that knowledge now has to the economy as the insulation between the two spheres is weakened.

In contrast, fully abstracted, symbolic knowledge has the ‘power of relation outside a context’ (Bernstein 2000, 30). Its generalisability means that concepts can be used in relation to other immaterial ideas, thereby building systems of meaning epistemically into bounded disciplines. Such highly abstracted concepts, or ‘thought contents’ as Karl Popper (1978) calls them, ‘stand in logical relationships’ (p. 160) within a conceptual field. It is in the connection between the concepts and propositions of disciplinary knowledge and its ‘know-how’ application to the material world as

technology that we locate the permeable boundary between symbolic knowledge and commodifiable knowledge. In the introduction we argued that disciplinary knowledge has two main functions; an instrumentalised one in the service of the economy and a broader social function in creating a society's symbolic order. We have argued that the increasing value of disciplinary knowledge for its economic function in recent decades has shifted the value awarded to each of these functions. We also argue that when material or extrinsic imperatives drive the production of knowledge as is currently the case, the function of knowledge in creating the consensus of shared reality is affected. Collective representations are society's symbolic 'cement', establishing the secularised moral–ethical order. They are the impersonal conceptual representations that connect people in modern pluralist societies. Durkheim used the term to refer to the shared sense of reality which, in replacing the mythologies that played the same integrating function in traditional societies, enable modern societies to cohere (Rata 2018). He described the 'logical integration' of the social order as 'the pre-condition for moral integration' (Durkheim, cited in Bourdieu 1979, 79).

The two different functions of disciplinary knowledge in relation to the social sphere and to the economic order is illustrated in the biographies of two computer programming inventors. Tim Berners-Lee's and Bill Gates' inventions have made huge contributions to the global knowledge economy. Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989, and Gates invented Microsoft in 1975. Although both Berners-Lee and Gates are computer programmers and their inventions change the world of computer programming, their approach towards how knowledge should be used is different. Despite the potential of the highly influential World Wide Web to become a huge wealth-generating commodity for its developer, Berners-Lee made it available for the public. He made it clear during his speech to the World Wide Web Foundation in 2008 that the Web is made for humanity:

We want the Web to support humanity. Of course, we have huge hopes for humanity ... The point about the Web is it's a platform. It should be, for the next generation, for the people who are students now, for people who are children now, they should find that the Web is a canvass that they can draw wonderful things on ... I just hope that they will take the foundation that we give them. They will take it and they will build on it and they will be able to give us tools. Give the next generation tools to be able to solve the huge issues that we have. Allow scientists to collaborate together across the world to share their half-born ideas and be able to find the cures for disease. And pursue those ideas about new forms of democracy and meritocracy that had been created on the Web. (Berners-Lee, 14 September 2008, Washington DC)

His commitment to the humanising function of knowledge, one that is to be shared for the benefit of all in creating society's collective representations stands in contrast to Gates who privatised Microsoft as a technology for consumption. In acting as the founder, Chairman, and CEO of Microsoft, Gates becomes one of the world's new billionaires. He represents the global knowledge economy and its elites, able to produce and distribute product and profit across borders in ways that challenge nation-states' power to regulate the operations of global capital.

According to Microsoft's 2017 Annual Report:

We protect our intellectual property investments in a variety of ways. We work actively in the U.S. and internationally to ensure the enforcement of copyright, trademark, trade secret, and other protections that apply to our software and hardware products, services, business plans, and branding. We are a leader among technology companies in pursuing patents and currently have a portfolio of over 66,000 U.S. and international patents issued and over 35,000 pending. While we employ much of our internally developed intellectual property exclusively in our products and services, we also engage in outbound and inbound licensing of specific patented technologies that are incorporated into licensees' or Microsoft's products. From time to time, we enter into broader cross-license agreements with other technology companies covering entire groups of patents. We also purchase or license technology that we incorporate into our products and services. At times, we make select intellectual property broadly available at no or low cost to achieve a strategic objective, such as promoting industry standards, advancing interoperability, or attracting and enabling our external development community. (Microsoft Annual Report 2017)

We use the contrasting ways in which Berners-Lee and Gates control the knowledge (both the ideas and the technology) they created to illustrate the different value awarded to the two functions of

disciplinary knowledge; values which we distinguished using the metaphor of price. Berners-Lee stand in the tradition of those who create and share knowledge freely, hence the ‘priceless’ term used in the section below. In doing so, he holds knowledge as ‘collective property’ (Shapin 1994). The knowledge developed by an individual is drawn from, and contributes to, the available knowledge developed by numerous individuals over time. It followed therefore for Berners-Lee that a particular invention which has as its purpose the dissemination of knowledge is well suited for sharing. It is Newton’s famous aphorism, ‘if I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’ (Merton 1993, 1).

‘Priceless’ knowledge

Our purpose in this section is to take the idea of ‘priceless’ knowledge, ‘the love of knowledge that is independent of material benefits’ (Moutsios 2018, 55) to trace its history. We argue that function of scientific or disciplinary knowledge as the symbolic resource for humanity has been a valued role of universities in the modern period, and before that for the philosophical communities identified by Collins (1998). It is this intellectual endeavour that produces the imaginary dimension and enables societies to create representations of themselves, that is, to create the dimension of meaning. Such social imaginary significations (to use Castoriadis’ term, cited in Moutsios 2018, 5) (or Durkheim’s collective representations) separates the dimension of the symbolic from that of the functional-instrumental. It is ‘the organisation of the world in accordance with its imaginary significations’ that ‘formulates human beings as social individuals’ one that is challenged by ‘the placement of the economy at the epicentre of societies’ in the modern era (Moutsios 2018, 7). These representations that we have of ourselves ‘indicate what is valued and what is not valued, what has worth and what does not have worth for a particular society’ (Moutsios 2018, 8).

Given that our purpose is to argue that a fundamental shift in the social meaning of knowledge’s ‘value’ has occurred as the economy moves to the centre in the anarchic drive of the capitalist system for evermore accumulation, we locate the idea of value in what a society creates for itself. As Moutsios (2018) points out, how we imagine ourselves and the meanings that follow from these imaginary significations are human creations. They are not natural laws. Because we create them, we decide what to value and what not to value, and, moving into the political implications of these ideas – we can *change* them. This ‘creative potential and the desire for formation constitute the *poetic* element of humanity – which in turn constitutes a culture’ (p. 11).

This is what we mean when we talk about the humanising potential of knowledge. It is what has been created in the culture of philosophical communities throughout history (Collins 1998) and in the universities of the past thousand years (Patterson 1997). Author 1’s Indonesian study was able to refer to scholarly communities in East Asia that have existed since 600–400 BCE showing that the intellectual life of Indonesia’s universities has a philosophical tradition in the region even if the actual institution of the university emerged in the West. Collins describes the creations of these philosophical communities as ‘intellectual products [that] have their own kind of sacred status, different from the more ordinary sacred objects with which everyday life is also permeated and which hold together personal friendships, property relations, and authority structures’ (1998, 18).

According to Collins (1998), before the ‘modern university’ (with its systems and institutions familiar today) was established, knowledge was initially produced through ‘interaction rituals’. Similar in function, if different in content, to the religious rituals referred to by Durkheim (1995), these communities comprised networks of intellectuals who have contributed to the development of knowledge since 600–400 BCE (Collins 1998). Their purpose is ‘to know the unknowable’ (Bernstein 2000, 30), something Moutsios (2018) describes as the task of the imagination, where meaning *and value* are realised. It is the imagination (the prediction of what might and should be) and its representation in the form of social significations which takes rational thought beyond itself to encompass the moral dimension. The two dimensions, the rational and the moral/ethical are not the same, nor are they necessarily connected. However, in recognising this, Durkheim (1912/2001) noted that

rational knowledge is the pre-condition of the moral. The conditions for their connection are not our purpose here (see Rata 2018), however, we point out that value does not exist on its own. It requires the idea of itself and creating that idea is a rational or conceptual act.

The terms used for knowledge creation have changed over time but it remains the knowledge of these interaction rituals that comprise the academic endeavour. Before the term 'science' was coined in the late 17th century, it was 'natural philosophy' that described the intellectual venture of scientific inquiry (Lindberg 1992) as it sought 'to know the unknowable.' We have used the term 'disciplines' and 'disciplinary knowledge' above but these are contemporary words for the historical intellectual venture.

This commitment to the 'pricelessness' of knowledge is still claimed today as the study of the internationalisation of Indonesian higher education undertaken by Author 1 showed. The Rector of the mid-ranked university spoke of the university as 'a house of knowledge'. However, there was ambiguity in his comment with the internationalisation strategy adopted by his university in order to make the institution competitive within the knowledge economy justified in terms of the older idea of knowledge as a universal humanising force.

Our university is a house of knowledge. Why are we the house of knowledge? Because universities are founded on the basis of knowledge. And knowledge is universal. It transcends across gender, geographical lines, and the boundaries of the world. Therefore, the advancement of knowledge should internationalise. Knowledge is not locally bounded, it is only the case that is local. (Author 1 2018)

The social meaning of knowledge

A significant shift in the value attributed to knowledge occurs as its symbolic function in providing society's imaginary significations (or collective consciousness) is replaced by its function as a productive force in the global knowledge economy. The shift, is concealed because the academic work of the university appears to be what it has always been. Indeed, vice-chancellors and rectors of universities throughout the world congratulate themselves on the ever-increasing productivity of their universities. It is a productivity measured by sophisticated systems of metrics. These show which university is ranked higher; which has 'climbed' the most; which is 'world class' (Shore 2010; Shore and Wright 2017; Author 1 2018). The desire for recognised global status was a strong motivating force in the three Indonesian universities studied by Author 1 (2018) with the discourse building in strength from seeking 'reputation,' to 'internationalisation' to 'world class.' The 'world class' desire was manifested in the vision, mission and strategic planning of the universities. The term was used by the interviewees in the study. For example, the vision of the high ranking university is 'to be an excellent and innovative world class university' (Author 1 2018). The Rector of the mid-ranked university envisions the university 'to be a conservation university with an international recognition' (Author 1 2018). The lower-ranked university shares the same vision. The Rector stated that the university aims 'to be an outstanding university on the basis of technology with a global outlook' (Author 1 2018).

However, 'social meanings change over time although the actual objects may appear the same' (Rata 2012, 21) and this is the case with the university. These institutions continue to exist of course. Indeed they multiply throughout the world. A great deal of scholarly activity occurs in the frantic treadmill of 'publish or perish' within each one (De Rond and Miller 2005) and the Indonesian universities were not exempt from this pressure. The question is less what is done in all this activity, but what it means? The research may be the same research as undertaken in the past but now it is 'priced' in the university's new commercial enterprises as a saleable commodity or is counted in the university's audit system as a measurable labour cost (Shore 2010). The academic who creates knowledge without securing funding grants produces a less-valued product because it has cost the university rather than increased its revenue (Sparkes 2007). This is despite that knowledge 'product' being the same whether it is funded by external research grants which contribute to the university's coffers or by the cost of the academic's salary which deplete those coffers. Shore and Wright

(2017) describe how universities are ‘under pressure to produce “excellence”, quality research and innovative teaching, improve world rankings, forge business links and attract elite, fee-paying students’ while simultaneously struggling ‘to maintain their traditional mandate to be “inclusive”, foster social cohesion, improve social mobility and challenge received wisdom – let alone improve the poor records on gender, diversity and equality’ (pp. 1–2).

The various managerial and accounting practices demonstrate the weakening of the insulation between the symbolic knowledge and its instrumental functions that Beck (2010) identifies. Shore and Wright (2017) use the phrase ‘the [blurring] boundaries of the university’ (pp. 1–2). For Moutsios (2018), universities are ‘business organisations controlled by managerial bureaucracies’ (p. 21). According to Rata (2010):

The university’s strategic importance to corporate business lies in three areas: It is where the latest and most valuable resource, ‘*knowledge*’ is created. It is where the *knowledge resource* is commodified and placed into the global knowledge market. And of equal importance, the corporatised university is where the ideology of the *knowledge market* is created and maintained. The university produces its own hegemonic discourses. (Rata 2010, p. 77, emphases added)

Ironically, the commodification of knowledge and the prominence of the market in knowledge production is, in part, a result of making knowledge available to more people than at any other time in history. The new professional class emerged within this huge expansion of higher education acquiring ‘expertise and cultural credentials [which] became primary forms of capital’. These ‘gave the “new class” its institutional base and relationship to the market’ (Rata 1996, 225) and provided the direct link between knowledge and the economy. Bernstein (2000) recognised how the weakening boundary between the economic and symbolic spheres was affecting knowledge:

Today throughout Europe, led by the USA and the UK, there is a new principle guiding the latest transition of capitalism. The principles of the market and its managers are more and more the managers of the policy and practices of education. Market relevance is becoming the key orientating criterion for the selection of discourses, their relation to each other, their forms and their research ... Of fundamental significance, there is a new concept of knowledge and of its relation to those who create and use it ... Knowledge is divorced from persons, their commitments, their personal dedications ... Knowledge, after nearly a thousand years, is divorced from inwardness and literally dehumanised. (Bernstein 2000, 86)

That blurring boundary between the economic and symbolic spheres creates contradictions in the discourses used to justify the university as a ‘business’. On the one hand, universities are under pressure to generate more income for their operational costs. On the other, they also need to maintain their sacred mission as centres of knowledge creation (Shore and Wright 2017). Author 1’s (2018) study of the determined way in which Indonesian universities are currently pursuing internationalisation found this unconscious ‘double speak’ in the accounts by senior administrators of their university’s strategies.

Actually, when talking about quality, our universities can compete with our neighbouring countries. It all depends on how we promote our universities. So, I hope with this internationalisation, we could improve our quality. (Author 1 2018)

Here ‘quality’ suggests both doing better in the competitive market and improving the knowledge quality of the university. ‘Excellence’ is another popular term in knowledge economy language. Like ‘quality,’ it can refer simultaneously to the knowledge ‘product’ and to a university’s competitive status. This dual discourse where the priceless discourse of knowledge and the priced market discourse are combined is a pragmatic strategy for universities to survive in the global higher education competition. Surprisingly, the dual discourse creates not cynicism towards what is, in effect, the commodification of knowledge, but optimism towards a belief that competition will produce greater research productivity as academics strive to outdo one another.

The conflation of the market discourse was observed in the Indonesian study. Promotion strategies tended to use this combined language, a practice illustrated by the Head of the International Office of the highly ranked Indonesian university. His language contains an interesting mixture of

knowledge for the benefit of humanity, in this case, about tropical diseases, but also the language of promoting a marketable product. The denial that the knowledge is being ‘sold’ fits uncomfortably with the terms ‘market’ and ‘market segment.’

We have Summer Courses in tropical diseases. We are not selling the technology. The brightest doctors from Europe will be desperate in handling tropical flu. Well, anything tropical basically. This is what our university offers. We are aware that there are many tropical countries. They have got large population[s] too, so the market is highly promising. We imagine our market segment is Africa, the one in the equator. (Author 1 2018)

Intensive competition drives down not only the quality of the product but its price while at the same time increasing quantity. In ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), the same outcome can be seen in the vast numbers of academic articles published that no one has time to read. Yet reading the writings of other scholars and writing for those academics to read one’s own work is the most important of scholarships, what Collins called ‘collective rituals’ (Collins 1998). The permanent written word reaches beyond the discussions at conferences and seminars, important as they are, to talk to those who have built the discipline over time. In fact, disciplinary literature is how academics ‘talk’ to one another across the ages. Reading and writing that literature is the core work of the university, a practice giving way to meeting attendance and research grant application writing.

Conclusion

The shift in the value awarded to disciplinary knowledge in the contemporary university from ‘scholarship to business’ would appear to be a cause for pessimism. However, we suggest a source of challenge to the increasing value of instrumentalised knowledge lies in the nature of disciplinary knowledge as symbolic knowledge. Knowledge can be priced only because it is firstly a priceless human creation as the source of social meaning. The paradox inherent to knowledge is that ‘In order to become a capitalisable resource knowledge needs to be created. But that act of creation is uncommodifiable. Indeed ‘commodified creativity’ is impossible. One destroys the other.’ (Rata 2010, p. 78). For the university to survive as an institution that remains true to its purpose as the place for the creation, questioning, and explanation of meaning, it must maintain its role as ‘a socially sanctioned symbolic network’ (Castoriadis 1987, 132).

Stavros Moutsios (2018) powerful account of the social imaginary and social institutions, for which he draws on Castoriadis, makes it clear why imaginary significations are incarnated in institutions as the creating force:

In short, a society cannot be conceived without institutions, but also without imaginary significations that are incarnated in institutions. For Castoriadis, these two forms constitute the socio-historical field, which expresses the symbiosis about also the tensions between the instituting society and the instituted society, what structures and what is structured, or history in the making and history made. The instituting society is the social imaginary, which creates significations and institutions ... Thus, there is a tension between the instituting and the instituted society, which expresses its perpetual state of self-alteration. (Moutsios 2018, 15)

The university’s task is to maintain that tension. To do so means shoring up the boundary between the symbolic and the instrumental, so that the classification of each component retains its own integrity. For the university, creating and maintaining the integrity of the symbolic realm is its reason for existence. The weakening of the boundary with the economy is a threat to this, but it is not an inevitable one. The activity of scholarship itself is the creating power of society’s humanising dimension. To retain this creativity, universities must retain their autonomy to pursue the love of knowledge without material benefit, something illustrated by Tim Berners-Lee.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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