Competition and Critique: Implications for Higher Education in the Post-Truth Era
Rajani Naidoo

The legacy of the Kantian conception of the university as a site for the progressive use of reason and criticality continues to exist in many universities across diverse world regions, and is often linked to the role of the university as a critic and conscience of society with responsibility for calling truth to power. These functions of the university are even more important in the ‘post-truth’ era in which digitalisation has led to greater difficulty in distinguishing facts from opinion and rational arguments from emotions; a situation which is exacerbated by powerful pressures to evaluate the media by the number of ‘clicks’ so that news going viral appears to be more important than the quality and integrity of the reporting. Together with the erosion of trust in public institutions and growing suspicion of scientific and professional expertise, ‘fake news’ has escalated with the potential to wield an inordinate influence on political opinion and action. These scenarios pose serious threats to higher education but at the same time offer opportunities for universities to counter such trends. An important role for universities in this context is to defend and reinvigorate the importance of critique and criticality.

There are, however, barriers to universities playing this important role. I would like to focus on one such barrier which is the extent to which accelerating and intensifying competition erodes the capacity of higher education to engage in genuine critique. As I have argued elsewhere (Naidoo, 2018), contemporary education reform is locked in a competition fetish. Competition in higher education is related to but sits in parallel with global economic competition. It also comes with its own set of rules, established by those institutions and systems already judged to be ‘the best’ on an international scale.

There are many varieties of competition in higher education which reinforce or displace one another or combine into new hybrid forms. The first competition relates to what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the struggle for scientific capital (Bourdieu 1998). Scholars have long engaged in various forms of competition including the symbolic destruction of rival scholarship. This competition is still dominant but it is mediated by other forms of competition. The second competition is the contribution of higher education to geo-political rivalry including new forms of imperialism (Henderson 2008). Higher education stands at the centre of such struggles. First, it is transformed into a global commodity for economic advantage. Second, higher education is deployed in a race for influence. The third type of competition is government sponsored competition. These are generally termed ‘excellence policies’. The core political aim is to identify ‘world class’ universities to compete on the world stage (Deem et al 2008). Funding is diverted to these universities to provide positional advantage for global competition. The fourth type of competition is status competition particularly ranking. Although rankings do not measure holistic performance and undermine institutional diversity, a significant number of universities across the world strive for membership, even when there is little capacity to feature in such rankings (Marginson 2017).

The Erosion of Criticality

In order to understand how various forms of competition impact on criticality, it is important to link macro analyses with close-up research to identify how structures, actors, and cognitive and affective factors interact to constitute and reproduce competition. In many countries, government is a key shamanic actor. In general, governments create the conditions for quasi-markets in higher education...
while market mechanisms are deployed to achieve political goals (Naidoo 2008). International organizations also play a shamanic role. The World Bank for example embeds neoliberal competition through structural adjustment programmes, conditions attached to loans and prescriptions for what they term ‘good governance’ while the OECD urges policy makers to reform education in a certain direction through coercive social construction (Pettersson et al, 2017). Global corporations have become potent political actors with a clear agenda: to push as deeply as they can to open up public sector education to for-profit provision.

Shamanic actors also sit inside the university. Some university leaders and managers have become ‘audit market’ intermediaries (Enders and Naidoo, 2014), channelling competition into the heart of the university; while others protect the academic heartland from the worst excesses of competition. And finally faculty and students too play their part. Competition is so powerful because it borrows legitimacy from elite scientific capital (Enders 2015).

In order to understand why competition is so powerful, we need to incorporate the power of beliefs, desires and emotions. The anthropological concept of the ritual, and Pierre Smith’s (1982) evocation of the concept of ‘mind snares’ which he describes as part of a ritual that encourages the mind to slip and fall into a trap that is set for it, is illuminating. The first mind snare is that competition is natural. Thus a simplistic conception of Darwinian natural selection is fused with what Bourdieu has called doxa, which is an unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were the objective truth. The second mind snare is the idea that competition is legitimate and just. The third mind snare is that competition is efficient and leads to innovation and quality. The fourth mind snare works through emotions. Competition works because it ignites in us the thrill of fame and the fear of shame (Broger, 2016)

What are the potential impacts of the competition fetish on the university’s role in critique and in fostering criticality? In relation to research, the competition fetish has the potential to colonise epistemic and professional frameworks. Mark Olssen (2016) has indicated how research excellence frameworks militate against ‘blue skies’ research, encourage dubious research tactics for maximizing citations and over-encourage conformity to external expectations. The intellectual content of the work becomes invisible as research is translated into a simple numeric score that can be ranked by those who manage the research competition. The looming Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is likely to increase pressures to realise the profit potential of research and to link research more closely to corporate interests. The danger is that research that is not profitable will be side-lined. In addition, there is a serious threat that corporations will push governments to develop stronger legislation to control access to research in order to extract private economic rents. The danger here is that the conventions and institutions that support the relative independence of research conceptualised by Polanyi as the "The Republic of Science’ will be undermined. In this context, research that critiques power including corporate power will become more marginal and always under threat.

In relation to teaching, students are rightly so demanding more democratic and agile education that is more responsive to their needs. A key challenge is how to engage constructively with students in fostering critical thinking together with social justice (Ashwin and Mcvitty 2015, McArthur 2018). A great deal of research has shown how the reconceptualization of students as consumers has the potential to lead to a loss of responsibility, a sense of entitlement and instrumental learning (Molesworth et al 2009). The Teaching Excellence Framework clearly exacerbates this and of course academics too play a major role by internalising a consumer mentality in relation to their teaching. In a competitive context where trust has been undermined, there are pressures to opt for safe, risk
free, spoon-feeding teaching particularly when teaching is measured through market verification, managerial indicators and student satisfaction.

In a future higher education system, teaching is likely to be configured into standardised units which can be priced and sold, knowledge is likely to be codified, tasks standardised and outputs quantified. While an academic elite may be able to maintain some autonomy, a growing number of academics will face work intensification and insecurity and they will be perceived to be exchangeable and disposable. These are all conditions which create real barriers to fostering criticality in both teaching and research.

Reinvigorating Criticality

This think piece has sought to delineate the powerful macro, meso and micro levels at which the competition fetish is produced and reproduced, thus highlighting the importance of linking macro approaches with research that is ‘close-up’. I have also shown how the competition fetish has the potential to undermine the role of the university as a site for critique and criticality and as a conscience for society.

I will conclude by outlining core questions for research which may lead to how we can re-imagine critique emerging from higher education systems that are becoming more and trapped in the competition fetish.

First, how do we protect higher education as a space for critical analysis and dialogue. How do we resist the pressure to see higher education purely as a space for consumption, a victim in the status wars orchestrated by governments and applauded by university leaders, or as a simple lever for economic development where ideas are validated purely in instrumental terms?

In terms of teaching, philosophers writing on education from John Dewey to Martha Nussbaum have all pointed to the dangers of producing docile, technically trained individuals rather than citizens with critical reasoning. I agree with these views but my concern is that they appear to have (at least implicitly) an elitist view of a golden age of education. The majority of students live in financially precarious situations and work in full time employment. They are often physically exhausted and time-poor. The challenge for us is how to take the principles of education that arose out of the very different conditions of a period of time spent in full time education with few financial worries and implement them under changing conditions of national and global inequality.

In relation to research, the boundary between the university and society conceptualised in different ways by Kant (1992) and Bourdieu (1998), together with the principle of academic freedom, has historically enabled scholars to call truth to power in many countries with limited repercussions. However, this space is being constrained as the boundary between universities and political and market forces becomes more porous and as autocratic managers emerge in some universities to propel higher education in a more corporate direction. It thus remains very important in contemporary times to search for, build, protect and replicate the relatively autonomous spaces within which we can engage in research in order to offer powerful critiques of current conditions. It is important that such research is peer-assessed in scholarly terms. At the same time, our critiques need to become more engaged with wider society. This requires us to rebuild relations of trust from the wreckage of the partially manufactured conditions of dis-trust. A key question is how to communicate our research accessibly without simplifying or playing to negative populist tendencies?

Finally, we need to interrogate the Kantian concept of progressive reason, which has historically been tied to western enlightenment in relation to contemporary forms of critique. Since critique
cannot be abstracted from its institutional location and socio-political, ideological and economic context, and in the light of challenges from anti-capitalist and post-colonial challenges, we need to explore how different rationalities relate to various classifications of acceptable and unacceptable critique in the academy. Most importantly we need to explore how a critical stance can avoid the trap of cynicism and despair so that we can reinvigorate criticality for the common good.

References


