

What does it mean for a university to have an academic project?

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Abstract

Despite being located within very different contexts, the flattening effects of global processes, such as ranking, reduce institutional differentiation as the discursive conception of universities is increasingly that of markets in competition with each other for consumers (Kojljenovic think piece). This paper which is a case study of a university in South Africa critically reflects on institutional identities and the nature of the academic project. The concept of ‘academic project’ is ambiguous and rarely discussed in higher education research. There are multiple conceptions of what constitutes an academic project for any university and not one ‘truth’, and this is probably as it should be given that universities are meant to be places of contestation with multiple aims. This paper critically reflects on what it means for a university to have an academic project. I argue that without the development of some form of shared (and yet not settled) consensus, it is difficult for an institution to work toward particular goals with a sense of collaboration and commitment. Of even greater concern is that without any shared sense of what academic project guides an institution, it becomes possible for a number of other drivers to dominate. In an era of managerialism, it is especially important for universities to act as stewards of the academic project – and this requires conversations about what it is. Using qualitative data from a survey, and observations, focus groups and interviews, the paper provides an analysis of the discursive construction of the academic project of Rhodes University. By drawing on a social realist approach I argue that views expressed by participants are *real* in the sense of being the true opinions of those who express them and in the sense that such views have effects in the world. At the ontological level such views are seen to emerge from whole range of mechanisms which are worth identifying to answer the question: ‘What must the university be like and its context for such views to exist?’ Recognising the existence of these varied opinions and the implications thereof allows for collective imagination of those views and ideas that can move the institution forward and those that can hold it back.

Keywords:

Academic project, institutional differentiation, knowledge economy, critical role and criticality