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FUTURE PERSPECTIVES ON  
THE STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK  
OF UNIVERSITIES

There are three cohering tendencies that become discernible when one thinks in terms of the present as well as the future of the university. They exert a profound influence on its structure. They can be described as the *communal character* of the university, the tendency towards *democratization*, and the *decentralisation* necessitated by the diversity of specialised fields of knowledge. The distinguishing characteristic of the university is to be found precisely in the fact that it is a *universitas* or community: a community of scholars in various disciplines (differing to a greater or lesser degree) all studying some aspect of reality and while doing so, striving through their interrelation, dialogue and interaction — i.e. by acting as a meaningful community — to grasp reality more fully than would be possible through separate and isolated endeavour.

The university is a community also in the sense of teachers, students and administrative personnel working in an intimately linked system. Each member of this community has specific responsibilities within the wider framework and these responsibilities accord each member some right of participation in the management of this *universitas*. The communal character of the university thus makes its own demands regarding participation and involvement in the structure of the university.

Added to this there is the second tendency, that of democratisation. This is the contemporary demand that everybody involved or affected by a matter should also have some say in the running of that matter. This tendency has been transferred from the political sphere to adjacent spheres such as higher education, although the differing and inherently hierarchical structure peculiar to the teaching process cannot simply be compared with

political processes. In Europe particularly the professorial oligarchy (perhaps aristocracy?) of the past has been radically transformed into a democracy (sometimes more of an ochlocracy) representing all the levels of the university community (including junior academics, technical personnel, students, administrators – even the humblest of maintenance workers). The professorial corps has virtually been reduced to the status of mere employees.

A third tendency affecting the structure of the university is the inherent character of the pursuit of knowledge – a complex activity encompassing research, application and teaching. As a result of the phenomenal growth in all fields of knowledge and the consequent increased specialisation, it has become essential to decentralise decision-making to those points where valid and informed decisions can be taken by the best experts in the relevant discipline.

The communal character of the university, democratisation and decentralisation (necessitated by subject specialisation) have all contributed to the emergence of structures in which large numbers, diversified groups and diffused interests all have to be accommodated in the organisational structure of the university of the future.

But then, in the contemporary world these tendencies have come up against the effect of another tendency – the massive, unprecedented growth in student numbers as well as the proliferation of the fields of study. The modern university has become a mammoth organisation, an industry, of tens of thousands of people and an increasing diversity of disciplines imposing an almost intolerable strain on its communal character. Ever more sophisticated equipment and supportive services are adding ever more specialists to the already extensive archipelago of islands of specialisation. All this ultimately results in the “multiversity” as already formulated by American University President Clark Kerr prior to the upheavals of 1968 in California. The problem posed

by large, giant-sized universities has not been even remotely solved by the universities themselves, though they have successfully tackled and mastered so many other problems. I would at this stage like to express in passing my conviction that the problem in large-sized universities lies not so much in the numbers of *students* as in the numbers of faculty. There are indeed techniques and methods designed to decentralise teaching to such an extent that the worst disadvantages of massification can be neutralised in respect of the students. But little success has been achieved in countering the centrifugal forces at work in scattering large numbers of lecturers into loose, autonomous units functioning in isolation both from their immediate colleagues and from their colleagues teaching other subjects. The greatest danger for the giant university is a loss of this sense of *universitas* among the academic personnel rather than among the students.

Another three-fold complex of tendencies which will increasingly determine the future structure of universities consists of *popularisation*, *secularisation* and *increasing complexity*. In contrast to the strongly élitist, selective composition of the student population of ten years ago, a progressively larger percentage of young people aspires to university education. This *popularisation* — which is only another form of democratisation — introduces totally novel elements into the student population, notably students from a socio-cultural background that has not really prepared them for entry into a university, and which mostly lacks the depth to support and guide them as far as study problems are concerned. The university is now compelled to create structures for coping with a wider spread of talent (qualitatively and quantitatively), a wider cultural spectrum, greater orientation towards professional training and a wider variety of motivations.

Parallel to this runs the fact that this popularised student-body is entering a *secularised* world caught in the throes of a revolution in values: a world regarding God as dead, in which man himself

has become both norm and purpose, and in which universalism is undermining group loyalties. A university which intends to adhere to the Christian normative point of view, will have to keep these circumstances firmly in mind in planning its structures. Add to this the fact that modern man is enmeshed in the *complexity* of the so-called post-industrial phase of the scientific revolution. His world is characterised by technological revolution, a general acceleration, a deluge of communicative impulses, a shrinking to the confines of what McLuhan has called the “global village” with all the attendant implications and complications for interpersonal relationships. This situation faces the university with a fascinating object of study, but also with a supremely frustrating complexity in which the student – as well as the lecturer – is finding it increasingly difficult to become functionally and optimally involved. The university thus has to create structures aimed at curbing and preventing also this type of dysfunctionality.

Some of the most stringent demands upon the university are made by tendencies caused by the *knowledge explosion*. The most significant of these are the explosion of knowledge, specialisation of knowledge and the interdisciplinary approach.

In the first place there is the well-known issue of the enormous growth or explosion of knowledge in our own times, accompanied inevitably by the ever accelerating rate of obsolescence of previously accepted knowledge. It has become more than ever essential to keep up to date and to remain at the head of the race for knowledge. This in its turn demands university structures which, in contrast to traditional academic conservatism, will ensure constant and effective revision of syllabuses and curricula, supported by an academic leadership which is able to integrate these changes and renewals. While the growing size of universities demands more permanence in positions of academic management (such as the appointment of permanent, full-time deans in some cases), the explosive growth of knowledge on the other hand de-

mands constant renewal, change and rejuvenation in academic leadership (such as the rotation of the departmental chairmanship rather than the permanent appointment of departmental heads). While Continental universities are replacing their tradition of annual changes in rectorship with longer term appointments, American universities are operating at a pace incurring “presidential fatigue” within three to five years!

As a result of knowledge expansion it is becoming increasingly difficult for individuals to have an authoritative overview of a wide field of study. The academic who wishes to make a meaningful contribution to the expansion of knowledge, has to concentrate on a progressively smaller area of *specialisation*. This tendency does not result only in a kind of tunnel vision among academics, with an attendant loss of coherence in the academic community, but is increasingly resulting in the phenomenon that the academic shifts his loyalty away from his own university community to a new community comprising the fellow practitioners in his particular discipline. Institutional loyalty thus is sacrificed to discipline loyalty, which is not bound by the confines of institutions or even by the frontiers of countries. A new international brotherhood of discipline specialists, straddling traditional frontiers, has thus come into being, sometimes at the expense of brotherhood at the specific university. There is thus also a need of structures to accommodate the required subject specialisation without undermining the intra-university community which should ideally encompass all subjects. As regards students, too, structures should be incorporated to support integration among various specialisations, and to provide an overview of other subjects beyond one’s “own” discipline. This should ideally culminate in the foundation of a theory of science which particularly allows also for the relationship between scholarship and philosophy of life or value systems.

The tension generated by the growth of knowledge and specialisation is increased by a new tendency which really clashes with both of the former: *interdisciplinary* scholarship. On the

one hand experience has shown that some of the most exciting innovations and discoveries have had their origin exactly in these areas of cross-pollination, in the no-man's land between the traditional frontiers of academic endeavour. The subject specialist who can widen his own abilities through multi-disciplinary competence, or the one who can liaise effectively to achieve interdisciplinary co-operation, is often the one to achieve spectacular break-throughs. But the interdisciplinary tendency also implies a movement away from an exclusively subject-centred orientation toward a more specifically problem-oriented approach. Most problems facing the contemporary scholar demand a multi-faceted approach starting out from *various* relevant disciplines which can embrace the problem in all its dimensions only by their joint co-operative effort. This has given rise to the contemporary practice of organising knowledge, not only according to the traditional lines of the discipline oriented approach, based on the underlying structure and interrelations of the knowledge itself, but increasingly also according to the application of knowledge to specific problems confronting the community. A problem-oriented organisation of knowledge almost always implies a new multi-disciplinary selection and combination from traditional disciplines. For Christian scholarship this multi-disciplinary problem-oriented approach accords a special opportunity to achieve a perspective based on its world and life view. Traditional university structures are mostly designed to fit a single discipline approach, and would thus require radical re-assessment and adaptation to accommodate multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to problem-solving.

I have already referred to those tendencies which are requiring the university to provide for a more active involvement (both in giving and in receiving) with the ever more organised international communities of scholars. But future university structures will also have to pay ever more attention to the expansion of tertiary education at centres other than universities, especially in view of the levelling of the growth curve of white residential stu-

dents which suggests that the country's white university potential has just about reached its ceiling. Of significance too are the training and research activities taking place within research institutes and, increasingly, within large business concerns as well. It should also be kept in mind that the phenomenal growth rate at Unisa has included an increase up to 34 per cent in its white students under the age of 25 years. This is highly significant as this group has traditionally been the preserve of the residential university.

An important perspective on the future of the university is also the fact that universities are increasingly becoming directed towards and dependent upon the *community*. This in turn has given rise to the community demanding *accountability* from the university. In a situation where such large numbers of young people are withdrawn from the labour market to devote time to study, the community is increasingly becoming interested in the effectiveness of the study programmes or, in popular terms, worrying about high failure rates. As the state is contributing ever bigger annual subsidies to the growing universities, it is also demanding information about the responsible spending of the funds, the effectiveness of administration and the success and "productivity" of training and research. The private sector likewise is contributing more generously and consequently insisting upon realistic educational goals in keeping with national realities and the most urgent national priorities. Even parents and students, faced with ever-increasing costs of tuition and residence, are demanding greater accountability. A university which neglects to revise its structures so as to enable it to apply quick and effective internal controls of academic, financial and general management efficiency in order thereby to supply unambiguous replies to outside queries, runs the risk of having some of its resources cut off.

From the foregoing it would seem that a number of tendencies which are likely to endure will determine or influence the

structural framework of the university. These are the communal character of the university, the tendency towards democratisation and decentralisation (subject specialisation); the tendencies towards popularisation, secularisation and increasing complexity, which drastically change the character and situation of the student population. There is, in the field of deployment of knowledge, knowledge explosion, specialisation and interdisciplinary activity. There are also new relationships with the international community of scholars and with local tertiary education institutions. Finally there is growing dependence on the community which in turn demands greater accountability.

Without going into too much detail, I would like to give a few concrete examples of the kind of structural adaptation which will become necessary.

1. In general, a greater sensitivity towards *administrative efficiency* is being demanded by tendencies such as the increased size of the university, the greater complexity of its task, the tension generated between community character on the one hand and size and decentralisation on the other, and the insistence of the community upon accountability. The university is a very complex and unique organisation demanding unique methods of administration. Forms of management presently in use, inherited from former phases, need to be fundamentally revised. In any case, there is a need for academic officials such as heads of departments, directors of institutes and deans to have some training in administrative techniques. Periodic administrative seminars involving academic and administrative personnel, where they can critically evaluate and revise the aims, methods and results of their university, are invaluable. A more collective form of top level management, a sort of cabinet led by the rector, is desirable both to establish co-ordination between the various specialized sections of administration and to allow fruitful interchange of ideas through uninhibited brainstorming.

2. In particular, structures will have to be revised to ensure that



decisions are taken at the most competent as well as the most economic level (as regards time/salary/production ratios). This will need careful analysis involving delegation, function determination and evaluation of the levels of difficulty and responsibility of the categories of decisions as well as the most suitable level at which these should be taken. Particularly it should be decided where, in the interests of competence and efficiency, the line should be drawn between collective and individual decision-making, e.g. whether it is a matter for decision by the Dean or Faculty, the Rector or Senate, the department or its Head. One has to enquire in each case whether there really is a rationale for assigning decisions to group or to individual responsibility.

3. In the composition of bodies such as Senate or Faculty attention will have to be paid to growing numbers with a view to effective debating and decision-making. There are clashing ideals here: one has to weigh the advantages of involvement and participation by senior academics in the interests of representative democracy against the need for smaller numbers in the interest of greater efficiency. In any case, attention should be paid to techniques of preparation of contentious matters before inclusion in an agenda for consideration and decision-making by a large and often unwieldy body.

4. Unnecessary duplication should be eliminated, especially when matters (sometimes in great bulk) are sent from lower to higher bodies merely to be reconsidered and then confirmed (such as from Faculty to Senate, from Senate to Council). Often the whole procedure has already degenerated to a mere formality with the obvious implication that the lower body is the logical authority to decide finally about a matter.

5. The question arises whether a faculty board, especially a larger one, is still an effective forum for communal decisions on curricula. Is there really any degree of interdisciplinary or interdepartmental *deliberation* and negotiation, or are curricula and

syllabuses simply approved as proposed by a department out of consideration for its “sovereignty”? Structures such as sub-faculties or curriculum groups within faculties merit consideration – but then again their successful functioning will depend on well-motivated academic leadership.

Several of these tendencies demand more opportunity for participation in university management by members of the university community other than the professorial corps, with whom the main academic authority traditionally resides. Provided that the final responsibility of the really competent bodies is not eroded, there are good reasons why some deliberative participation should be accorded to groups such as students and junior academics, on matters in which they are competent to make a useful contribution. Furthermore, administrative personnel have traditionally been excluded as *members* of management bodies even though senior administrative officials naturally exert considerable influence during discussions and in the preparation of documents and the implementation of decisions. The duties of university administrators have nowadays become so highly diversified and require such high levels of professional competence that universities should seriously consider whether they are in fact according their top officials adequate recognition, e.g. by their inclusion as full members of academic governing bodies and even involvement in academic teaching activities. In this way the gap between academic and administrative personnel, which is a serious problem in many institutions, can be bridged naturally and the communal character of the university can be realised more fully.

7. Universities, just like the Civil Service, love to institute new services and departments, but once instituted, these tend to become sacrosanct even though they have acquired the character of a museum or an archive. In the event of knowledge organisation becoming more problem-oriented, universities will simply have to devise structures to phase out obsolescent, less relevant activities which have sunk to a lower priority than previously. While disci-

pline-oriented knowledge will always remain relevant within the wider encyclopedic set-up of knowledge, problem-oriented organisation of knowledge will inevitably change in changed circumstances, in relevance as well as in priority. Universities will not be able to add to their load without occasionally shedding superfluous ballast.

8. The special demands made upon our universities by interdisciplinary work, both as regards teaching and research, have been only very partially understood. We will have to design structures, test them and improve them, for promoting co-operation and teamwork not only on interdepartmental but also on interfaculty levels. The proliferation of institutes will have to be reconsidered very critically and I consider it preferable to limit the number of institutes to only those instances and activities which cannot be really accommodated within the confines of existing departments, whether it be on the grounds of the size of the project or its interdepartmental nature. As yet we know far too little about the internal dynamics of interdisciplinary research and the interdisciplinary teaching group, as well as the factors inhibiting or promoting their success. But then, next to formal structures, it is often informal structures allowing for meeting and discussion between academics from diverse disciplines which give the most gratifying results – such as a popular senior common room where members of all departments meet in the course of the day and become involved in creative discussion.

9. The creation and promotion of structures for student guidance and for continuing education have become of paramount importance, to supply the needs of the greater diversity of less well-prepared students as well as the needs of alumni and other older members of the community to be kept updated in the ever-accelerating knowledge race. On the one hand we need structures to accommodate youth more effectively and, on the other hand, structures to enlarge the scope of the university to encompass more than its traditional character of a “youth ghetto”.