

# Fast Food for Thought: How to survive and thrive in the corporate university



**Gary Rolfe**

*Professor of Nursing*

*College of Human and Health Sciences*

*Swansea University*

*Professor of Innovation and Development*

*Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board*

# Introduction

## The university in ruins



### The idea of a university

It is generally accepted that the idea of the modern university came into being at the end of the eighteenth century and that the first concrete example was the University of Berlin, which was founded in 1810. Cardinal John Henry Newman, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, regarded the business of the university as ‘Liberal Education’ - the disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and without any consideration of its application outside of the ivory towers of academe. When Newman spoke and wrote about the purpose of the university as being the pursuit of knowledge, he made it quite clear that he was referring to the pursuit of learning, rather than the creation of new knowledge through research. For Newman, then, the university:

is a place of *teaching universal knowledge*. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a university should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of literature and science. (Newman, 1858, p.xxxvii, original punctuation and emphasis)

Furthermore, Newman was explicit about what constituted a liberal education. He argued that a well-rounded diet of the classics, theology and philosophy was a sufficient foundation for *any* profession, including medicine and law and, presumably, nursing and the other healthcare disciplines, since ‘it prepares [a man] to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility’ (Newman 1858, p.135). Newman was strongly opposed to the growing demands of an industrial society for narrow specialists, arguing that ‘a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men (sic) together for three or four years and then sent them away’ was preferable to one which ‘gave its degrees to any persons who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects’. He pointed out that ‘a University is, according to the usual designation, an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill (p.109).

## The scholar disappears

Clearly, Newman's idea of a University was never going to endure very far into the twentieth century, and it is now more than 70 years since the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, predicted the end of the traditional enlightenment university with its values of broad scholarship and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge:

The scholar disappears. He is succeeded by the research man who is engaged in research projects. These, rather than the cultivation of erudition, lend to his work its atmosphere of incisiveness. The research man no longer needs a library at home. Moreover, he is constantly on the move. He negotiates at meetings and collects information at congresses. He contracts for commissions with publishers. The latter now determine along with him which books must be written. (Heidegger 1938, p.125)

Heidegger was concerned that what he referred to as 'meditative' or deep thinking was being replaced as the mode of thought valued by the university and by society in general by instrumental or 'calculative' thinking geared towards ends rather than means (Heidegger 1955). According to Heidegger's prediction, 'erudite' scholarship would be replaced by 'incisive' research, books would be replaced by research journals, and reading for knowledge would be replaced by systematic literature searches for information. Ultimately, scholarly books would disappear as the publishing industry took commissioning decisions based entirely on profitability and projected sales figures. As Heidegger foresaw, the content of academic books and university libraries would be determined not by individual scholars but by market researchers and corporate publishing houses.

By the end of the 1950s, the American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, had also recognized the threat to scholarship posed by instrumentalism, and was echoing Newman in his call for academics to 'Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians' (Mills 1959, pp.245–6). Mills took the view that most empirical social research being undertaken in universities was 'thin and uninteresting', suitable only 'for beginning students and ... those who are not able to handle the more difficult substantive problems of social science' (p.226). Four years later, the bio-scientist, Bernard Forscher (1963), was similarly concerned about the sheer volume of under-theorised and unnecessary research projects in the 'hard sciences' and the accompanying demise of scholarly and theoretical work. By 1990, Ernest Boyer had noted that the term 'scholarship' was now being used almost exclusively to refer to 'basic research' and that its traditional meaning of 'a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places ... measured by the ability to think, communicate and learn' (Boyer 1990, p.15) had been lost.

By the time that pre-registration nurse education in the UK had moved into higher education in the 1990s, the transition of the university from a haven for scholarship and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge to a global competitor in the 'knowledge economy' of late capitalism was more or less complete. The state of the university was neatly summed up by the cultural theorist, Bill Readings, who published a book in 1996 entitled *The University in Ruins*, which charted the gradual demise of higher education in the USA and the UK. Readings' thesis was that, for a number of reasons, the university as an institution had lost its essential and fundamental role in Western society and had turned to liberal capitalism and the free market economy in an attempt to reinvent itself as a business with a customer-base and a product to sell. The consequence of this turn, as Readings (1996, p.22) observed, was that 'the University is not just *like* a corporation; it *is* a corporation. Students ... are not *like* customers, they *are* customers'.

## Healthcare education in the corporate university

It is my contention that in the intervening 15 years since *The University in Ruins* was first published, the university has become ever more corporate, and nurse educationalists – many of whom believed at the time they were embarking on some great academic adventure – are more and more confused about who they are, and what they should or could be doing. This confusion has spread across most healthcare disciplines in many countries throughout the world, from Iceland to Australia. It can be seen, for example, in the current and ongoing debates and disagreements about the tensions between theory and practice, research and teaching, education and apprenticeships, and about whether nurse education is being dumbed-down or over-intellectualised. Moreover, the recent move in England to an all-graduate nursing profession has reignited a broader debate about the pros and cons of ‘graduateness’ in the healthcare professions.

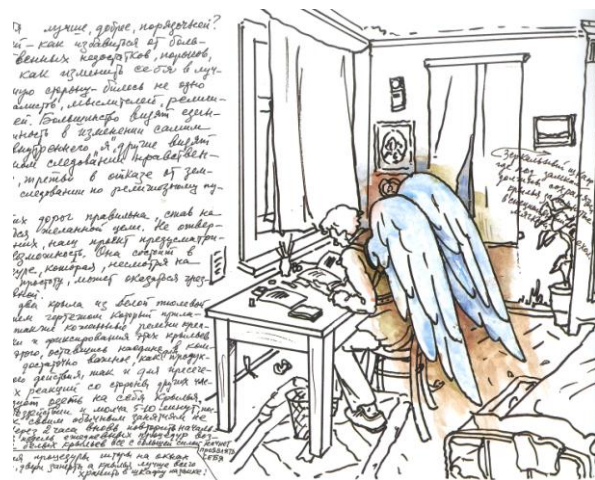
We can divide the reactions and responses of healthcare lecturers and academics to the growing corporatisation of the university into a number of categories. Those who have only recently entered academia, and have perhaps themselves been students during the past decade, will have known nothing else and might wonder what all the fuss is about. Some of those who previously worked or studied in the traditional, enlightenment university, with its emphasis on education as an end in itself, have responded to the current state of higher education with cynicism, despair or nostalgia. Others have enthusiastically embraced the new opportunities opened up by the corporate university for ever-more managers, administrators and research workers.

For Readings, none of these responses was acceptable. He suggested that we need to find a way of *dwelling in the ruins* of the university that entailed neither cynical despair nor romantic nostalgia for a lost past. We must, he insisted, find new and productive ways of being and working that neither submit to the corporate agenda nor attempt the impossible task of trying to rebuild the enlightenment university in a post-industrial, postmodern society where there is no longer a demand for it. Whatever promises higher education might have held out to nursing and other healthcare professions in the 1990s, we now all find ourselves in a very different institution to the one we initially signed up to. Getting out is not a realistic option, and a wistful plea for a return to some golden age of tea in the senior common room is likely to be met with ridicule and laughter. Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible (indeed, essential) to rethink and renegotiate our place in the corporate university, if not at an institutional level, then at least as individual academics concerned with the best interests of nursing and healthcare education, of our professions and, above all, service users.

This paper, which is divided into three parts, will raise some questions and suggest some strategies for not only *surviving* in the corporate university, but for *thriving* both personally and professionally in ways that do not compromise our commitments and values as healthcare professionals and human beings. It is offered as a personal reflection, based on nearly 40 years of experiences in UK universities, firstly as a student and latterly as a lecturer and a professor of nursing. As such, it is delivered from a particular geographical and disciplinary perspective, the only perspective I can talk from with any real authority and authenticity. However, I believe that these ideas, thoughts and analyses can be applied with a degree of success to other disciplines in other parts of the world. I therefore invite you to think about how my thoughts and experiences might resonate with your own, and about the wider professional and educational implications for healthcare in other settings and in other countries.

# Part 1

## A concise dictionary of Unispeak



In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell introduced the concept of ‘Newspeak’: a language invented by the totalitarian government of the fictional dictatorship of Oceania. In the language of Newspeak, some words meant the opposite of what they seemed, while others were removed from everyday usage, making it impossible to frame heretical thoughts that were considered unacceptable to the state. Examples of Newspeak included phrases and neologisms such as the *Ministry of Love* (the government department responsible for torture) and *joycamp* (a forced-labour prison camp). Orwell was trying to make the point that the words we have at our disposal not only shape the way we experience the world, but also put limits on what we are able to think and say about it. It seems to me that something similar is happening in the way that universities think and talk about themselves, where certain words have been phased out, new ones introduced, and others are being used in new and unusual ways. If we are to survive and thrive in the corporate university, we firstly need to learn the language. Here, then, is a short and concise dictionary to help you understand some of the key words and phrases of Unispeak – the universal language of the corporate university.

### Key words and phrases in Unispeak

#### Excellence

A quick way to pick up the vocabulary of Unispeak is to look at your university’s mission statement. Indeed, the very fact that universities now have missions that they feel the need to state is itself a sign that they have achieved corporate status. The mission statement of my university begins, as do most, with a commitment to *excellence*. Although we might expect all universities to aspire to excellence almost by definition, it is a word that has been largely stripped of its previous meaning – indeed, of *all* meaning – so that large corporations, including universities, are free to use it for whatever ends they see fit.

Bill Readings has famously defined the university as a disparate group of individuals united by a common complaint about parking. He tells the story of the Cornell University car parking service being given an award for ‘excellence in parking’ in recognition of the fact ‘that they had achieved a remarkable level of efficiency in *restricting* motor vehicle access’ (Readings 1996, p.24). You may have had similar experiences of ‘excellent’ car parking

services which might have caused you to wonder exactly what the word ‘excellence’ means in this context, and in what ways a 20-minute drive around the campus looking for a parking space might be deemed to be excellent. As Readings points out, the term could just as easily be used to describe attempts to increase *or* decrease the number of parking spaces available to staff and students, so that ‘excellence can function equally well as an evaluative criterion on either side of the issue of what constitutes “excellence in parking”’ (p.24).

Although the term ‘excellence’ can be applied to almost anything, including parking, catering facilities and teaching, it is most often used in the university in relation to research. For example, my own university promises to:

provide an environment of research excellence, with research being undertaken that is world-leading and internationally recognised and that informs all other activities at the University. (Swansea University Strategic Plan, 2009–14)

In order to decipher the meaning of the word ‘excellent’ as it is used here, we need to know that universities in the UK are assessed (and also partially funded) according to their score in the Research *Excellence* Framework (REF), and that the terms ‘world-leading’ and ‘internationally recognised’ are both taken from the REF descriptors for excellent research. Similar phrases and sentiments will be found in the mission statements of many other UK universities, which now set standards for excellence in research almost entirely in terms of the number and size of research grants awarded and the impact factor (I.F.) of the journals in which the research reports are published.

There is a certain irony in the use of these particular measures of research excellence. On the one hand, it is often the case that the larger the research grant, the greater the number of research assistants employed on the project. Excellent researchers, by definition, tend to be those who *manage* and *administrate* research budgets, projects and staff. It is the less-than-excellent researchers, those who fail to win large grants, who are most likely to be found actually *doing* research. On the other hand, excellent research reports are defined as those published in journals with high impact factors, that is, journals whose papers are most often cited in other journals by other researchers. In contrast, papers aimed at journals with higher circulation figures, and whose readers tend to be practising professionals rather than academics, tend to fall far short of the university criteria for excellence. By definition, then, an excellent researcher tends to be someone who does very little field research and whose work is rarely read by those professionals most likely to put it into practice.

## Quality

Unlike many examples of Unispeak, which require several paragraphs in order to elucidate the meaning of a single word, *quality* translates more or less directly into English as *quantity*. For example, we have seen that quality of research is measured numerically, using the score awarded in the Research Excellence Framework or its international equivalent. This, in turn, is calculated in large part based on the number and size of research grants and the impact factor of the journals in which research findings are published. Similarly, the quality of educational provision and teaching in the UK is measured by a score awarded by the Quality Assurance Agency; this is largely based on satisfaction scores calculated from student questionnaires, by course attrition rates (which should be low to denote high quality teaching and academic support, but not so low as to suggest lax academic standards), and by the percentages of first-class degrees awarded (which should be high to denote high quality teaching, but not so high as to suggest poor academic standards).

The National Student Survey (NSS), commissioned by the UK Funding Councils for Higher Education, offers a striking example of how the quality of education provision has been quantified, allowing my university to state with absolute precision that ‘the ability of

staff to communicate effectively' is rated at 91% and 'the enthusiasm of staff' is rated at 87% (Swansea University Strategic Plan, 2009–14). On the level of the individual, my university has recently introduced key performance indicators (or KPIs as they are typically referred to) into its system for annual professional development review (PDR) of academic staff. This has effectively redefined the review of professional development as the assessment of performance against measurable, quantifiable outcomes, and has reduced the value of my contribution to the university to a series of numerical scores. Once the university's 'research incentivisation scheme' is fully operational, these scores will (or perhaps not) entitle me to a cash reward.

### **Knowledge economy**

When Peter Drucker first popularised the term 'knowledge economy' in 1966, he could not have anticipated its use in sentences such as 'the University's rapidly expanding world-class healthcare knowledge economy cluster' (Swansea University Strategic Plan, 2009–14). In fact, Drucker's original relatively complex and sophisticated concept of 'knowledge economy' (Drucker 1966) transliterates into Unispeak more or less as the monetary value of knowledge. This simple definition enables the university to assign a financial value to members of academic staff according to their 'knowledge transfer' activities, and to calculate profit margins based on the difference in cost between generating and selling (or, in Unispeak, transferring) knowledge.

### **Learningandteaching**

Although Unispeak has redefined some words, others have been largely expunged from the vocabulary. This fits with the Orwellian idea that it is difficult even to *think* about concepts for which we have no words. I find it slightly shocking, therefore, that the mission statement of my own university does not contain the word 'education'. In place of education, my university promises to:

deliver an outstanding student experience, with teaching of the highest quality that produces graduates equipped for distinguished personal and professional achievement. (Swansea University Strategic Plan, 2009–14)

The very concept of education is problematic to the corporate university, and it has been slipping out of favour and out of use for a number of years. It was initially replaced by the term 'teaching and learning' and then, to reflect the growing importance of the 'customer satisfaction' agenda, by learning and teaching. Finally, as the individual words lost their original meanings, it mutated into the one-word mantra *learningandteaching*. Although the term is used as if it is a direct translation of the word 'education', it seems to me that something important has been lost; that delivering opportunities for *learningandteaching* amounts to something significantly less than providing an education.

The precise nature of what is lost when we replace education with *learningandteaching* is open to debate, and cynics might add that nobody really cares any more. Now that the cost of going to university in the UK has been quantified and charged directly to the student, it might be argued that the 'value added' ingredient that transforms learning into education is too costly and is, in any case, unquantifiable. This is a powerful argument in an age where quality is reduced to quantity and where universities are forced to justify their existence in terms of measurable outcomes. Whereas learning can be measured by student performance in exams, and teaching can be assessed and rated through student evaluation forms, education cannot be so easily quantified and therefore, to all intents and purposes, does not exist.

## **Student experience**

The mission statement of my own university goes a step further in removing not only all references to education, but also omitting the word ‘learning’ and replacing it with something called the ‘student experience’. This shift in the rhetoric of the university is perhaps a tacit acknowledgement that most students do not wish to buy an education and many are not even particularly interested in learning. Certainly, most students that I talk to regard the point of coming to university as simply ‘to get a degree’ that will prepare them for employment. The association in the minds of students between coming to university and getting a well-paid job is perhaps unsurprising in the current economic climate, where many students wish to see something tangible for the considerable investment they are making in terms of fees, rent and general living costs that can leave them with tens of thousands of pounds of debts.

As competition between universities increases and as the quality of education becomes less and less of a selling point, the decision about which university to attend is more and more a question of which will provide the best, all-round ‘student experience’. My own university has addressed this challenge through ‘student lifecycle development work’, by redesigning its ‘student-facing functions’ and by developing a ‘student relationship management function’ (Swansea University Strategic Plan, 2009–14).

## **§§§**

There is clearly a need to understand the language of the corporate university and to be able to translate between Unispeak and English, not least because if we take words such as excellence, quality, education and learning at their face value, we might find ourselves at odds with the mission of our employers. To give but one example, the English term ‘to provide high quality education to students’ translates into Unispeak as something like ‘to enhance the learningandteaching environment in order to ensure a uniform spread of grades, a low attrition rate, and a high score on surveys of student satisfaction’. If we do not understand this, we can quickly find ourselves in trouble for failing to be incentivised and not meeting our KPIs (which is, of course, Unispeak for literally not ‘measuring up’).

## **Some new terminology**

The words we have at our disposal shape and constrain our thinking, and so in order to counteract the effect of Unispeak and to allow us to think in novel ways, I will now suggest some new terminology of my own.

### **The McVersity**

The sociologist, George Ritzer (1993), introduced the idea of McDonaldization to illustrate how entire societies have been rationalised according to the business model of a certain chain of fast-food restaurants. He identified five principles of McDonaldization, namely efficiency, calculability, predictability, increased control, and the replacement of human by non-human technology, each of which can be seen in operation in the corporate McVersity. The most striking of these is the drive towards efficiency in order to maximise profit. The fast-food business achieves maximum efficiency (and thus maximum profit) by handing over many of the services traditionally provided by the restaurant to the customer. Customers queue up to order their food (a job traditionally carried out by a waitress), stand and wait at the counter while it is prepared (thereby maximising table occupancy), carry their food to the table (the job of a waitress), eat it with their fingers directly out of a paper bag (cutting the cost of cutlery and crockery), and clear away their own rubbish directly into a bin (cutting out waitressing and washing up).



Predictability is also a key element to success in the fast-food business, where excellence is defined in terms of consistency. Seen in this way, the experience of sitting on a plastic chair eating a burger out of a paper bag can be an excellent experience, as long as it is always the *same* experience regardless of time and place. The ‘excellence’ of the experience of eating a burger in a McDonalds restaurant in Cambridge today lies in the fact that it will be the *same* experience as eating a burger in a McDonalds in Tokyo next week. In McDonaldized organizations, excellence is defined by the rigorous and consistent application of standards rather than by the standards themselves. I will leave you to draw your own analogies with the world of higher education, pointing out only that one of the key questions that external examiners of university courses are typically asked is not ‘How good is this course?’, but rather ‘Is it of a similar standard to those being offered elsewhere?’.

### **The flat-pack curriculum**

It is probably fair to say that in the two decades since the publication of Ritzer’s book, McDonalds has responded accordingly and is now in many ways a model organization that many of our university vice-chancellors could no doubt learn a great deal from. Perhaps a more apposite model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century corporate university is the IKEAfication of higher education, where customers are directed along a predetermined, one-way route through the showroom before lifting flat-pack packages from a warehouse shelf, transporting them home and assembling them themselves. The IKEAfication process is similar in many ways to McDonaldization insofar as the customers perform many of the services not usually expected of them, taking on aspects of the roles of warehouse worker, shop assistant, delivery person and even manufacturer.

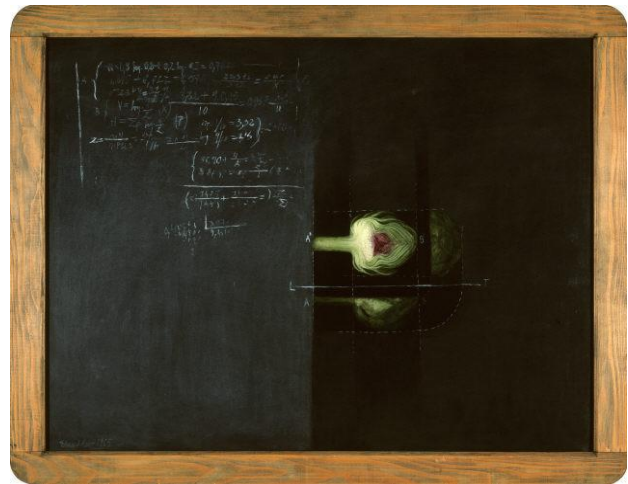
We can see this model applied to higher education on a variety of levels, but perhaps most strikingly in the design, construction and delivery of courses from pre-existing generic units and modules. This philosophy of modular course design has the advantage of offering to students the opportunity to build courses to their own specifications from prefabricated components. However, critics have pointed out that what is gained in flexibility is subsequently lost in integrity and continuity, and we could perhaps argue that the flat-pack curriculum is only education in the same way that a box containing chipboard, screws and an allen key is furniture.

### **The assembly line research project**

As pressure mounts to win bigger and bigger research grants, C. Wright Mills’ era of the individual scholar has been replaced by that of the large multi-disciplinary research team. The typical research team is comprised of relatively junior (and therefore cheap) researchers and research assistants managed and administered by a principal investigator (PI) who holds the research grant and is responsible for the successful completion and write-up of the research report. As research teams grow ever larger, a division of labour becomes necessary, with individuals within the team being allocated to particular tasks. The research project therefore comes to resemble a factory production line, with each worker completing their own small part before passing it on to the next person down the line. These teams of jobbing researchers tend to be recruited for their specialist research skills rather than for any particular substantive subject specialism, and are therefore able to turn their hand to research on any topic, regardless of their academic subject specialism, professional background or clinical experience. Increasingly, when I talk to colleagues about research projects, we find ourselves discussing the PI’s role of project management rather than the research itself. Similarly, agendas in research meetings focus more and more on the size and source of grants than on how individual projects might contribute to coherent programmes of research or the benefits of the project to service users and practitioners.

# Part 2

## Knowing our place



### Into the academy

Nursing in the UK moved *en masse* into the higher education system during the 1990s, largely as a result of the introduction of the *Project 2000* curriculum and the growing emphasis on theoretical perspectives from disciplines outside of nursing such as sociology and psychology. Prior to this move, the vast majority of nurse education, or perhaps we should say nurse *training*, took place on hospital premises and followed an apprenticeship model in which students and tutors alike were part of the health service workforce.

The move into higher education brought with it a number of clear benefits. The academic status of nurse education and nurse educators increased, as for a while did the profession of nursing. The introduction of a new ‘academic’ curriculum broadened the theoretical scope and perspective of the discipline, although non-nurses from other departments taught much of this new material in the first instance. The greatly intensified emphasis on research was very welcome in a discipline that lacked a coherent evidence-base, and served to open up communication within the discipline as nurse tutors and lecturers began to publish and speak to one another at national and international conferences.

However, the move to higher education also brought with it a number of disadvantages. Most significantly, it contributed to a separation of nurse education from nursing practice, both physically as many schools of nursing moved out of the hospitals and into university premises, and also professionally, as many former nurse tutors found themselves with new employers and new job titles. By the end of the 1990s, nurse education had become a separate profession from nursing, with psychological and sociological consequences that have still not been fully resolved. The most significant of these is the pressure exerted by the university to sign up to an agenda that privileges research over teaching, and theory over practice. Many nurse academics found themselves under new contractual arrangements with new goals and performance indicators which judged them according to the size of their research grants and the journals in which their papers were being published, rather than on the beneficial impact their work was having on nursing practice and on the health and well-being of service users.

## Finding our place

It could be argued that from the outset, nursing and the healthcare professions never really fitted into the academic structure of the university. When pre-registration nurse education initially moved into the higher education sector, university disciplines could be divided (with a few exceptions) into pure subjects, such as philosophy, maths and literature, and applied subjects such as engineering, law and architecture. As higher education becomes increasingly focussed on vocational training, the pure disciplines are either under threat of closure or have already vanished, while the applied subjects are expanding and flourishing. This should be good news for nursing and the healthcare professions, which are most certainly applied subjects.

It would be a mistake, however, to think about subjects such as nursing in the same way as engineering or even law. The university has for many years accommodated technological disciplines such as engineering, law and business studies, which involve the relatively straightforward and direct application of theory to practical problems. University-based *technologists* generate and test knowledge and theory and then pass it on to *technicians* who apply it in the field. For example, a technologist might draw up a plan for a new bridge based on research and best evidence, and a technician would then construct the bridge by rigorously following that plan. The technologies sit well within the university, since they depend heavily on theoretical research, which is then applied to a practical problem in a simple and straightforward way, according to what Habermas (1970) and Schön (1987) have referred to as the principle of ‘technical rationality’.

However, nursing and other healthcare disciplines do not readily fit the technical-rational model in quite the same way, and there can be no simple translation of theoretical knowledge and research findings into practice. Caring for a patient or service user is complex and complicated in ways that building a bridge is not. Steel girders have certain physical properties and always behave in the same way under the same conditions. People, however, respond differently at different times and in different situations in ways that are never fully predictable. Much of the knowledge required for practice cannot therefore be taught in advance and straightforwardly applied in any context without regard for the individual service user who is at the heart of the process. Indeed, some of it cannot even easily be expressed in words. The healthcare disciplines are certainly *applied*, but are only partly technologies. They are also *practices* in the same way that music, art and teaching are practices. Unfortunately, practice disciplines do not fit well with the current university ethos and mission in the way that technologies do, and for that reason they have traditionally been located outside of the university system in music academies, art schools and teacher-training colleges.

The fundamental distinction between technologies and practices lies in the relationship between education, research and practice. Technological disciplines regard the three as separate and freestanding, and are premised on a straightforward one-way flow of information from research to practice. The knowledge base of subjects, such as engineering, is largely propositional; it can be expressed in books and lecture notes, its application can be perfected in the laboratory or practicum, and then applied directly to real-world settings. In contrast, practice disciplines begin with the assumption that education, research and practice are inseparable parts of a greater whole, in which knowledge, information and ideas circulate freely in all directions. Practitioners ask questions of practice, they challenge established practices, they learn from practice and apply their learning back into practice. Donald Schön argued that the most important and relevant education *for* practice occurs *in* practice and is, as the Latin roots of the word ‘education’ suggest, *drawn out* of practice. As he pointed out:

Schools of engineering lose credibility because they are seen as producing narrowly trained technicians deficient in capacity for design and wisdom .... What aspiring practitioners need most to learn, professional schools seem least able to teach. (Schön 1987, p.8)

It could perhaps be argued that just as the healthcare disciplines, and nursing in particular, were beginning to understand and act on Schön's ideas for practitioner education in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they suddenly found themselves in a new academic environment with little or no understanding or sympathy for this approach. Thus, he continued:

The professional schools of the modern research university are premised on technical rationality ... [which] presents first the relevant basic science, then the relevant applied science, and finally, a practicum in which students are presumed to learn and apply research-based knowledge to the problems of everyday practice. (Schön 1987, p.8)

Although many of us have been striving over the past two decades to implement reflective, practice-based curriculums, the higher education agenda has been moving decisively in the opposite direction. And whilst there have certainly been some significant achievements in innovative, reflective, work-based education, it has been an uphill struggle in a culture where outcome is valued over process, where quality is measured quantitatively in terms of degree classification and attrition rates, and where education is generally devalued in favour of research.

Arguably, then, the university has failed to welcome and accommodate the practice professions into its academic structure; that is to say, it has failed to recognise that the epistemological and ontological needs of nursing and the healthcare disciplines are different from either those of the pure disciplines or those of the applied technical disciplines. In particular, the knowledge base of practice is only partially accounted for by the research-driven, technical-rational model. This misunderstanding and miscasting of the practice disciplines has had significant and damaging implications in terms of the educational and research agendas and outcomes that nurse academics are expected to deliver. The failure by universities to rethink their structure and purpose in response to this growing, third category of academic disciplines has caused a certain amount of conflict, confusion and casualties amongst some academics in the nursing and healthcare disciplines.

# Part 3

## How to thrive in the McVersity



### Towards a new scholarship of practice

Bill Readings tells us that the university is in ruins and that there are a number of ways we, as academics and students, can respond. We can pine nostalgically for the return of the enlightenment university, we can actively and outwardly rebel against the corporate McVersity that has taken its place, or we can sink into an attitude of passive despair. For Readings, none of these was acceptable, and he argued instead that we should ‘dwell in the ruins ... without alibis’, that is, as authentically and productively as we are able, given that we all need to satisfy the demands of the corporate agenda by teaching, researching and publishing.

Most of the issues I have raised so far can only be addressed on a structural level by heads of department and vice-chancellors. Some departmental heads have been more assertive in doing so than others, and some vice-chancellors have been more open-minded and responsive to new ideas than others. For those of us who, despite our best efforts, continue to find ourselves subject to a mission statement that we neither signed up to, nor agree with, there is a pressing need to rethink our personal approach to scholarship for practice disciplines such as nursing. From my observations of colleagues who have managed to address the issues of significance and importance to nursing and healthcare professionals and service users while not only *surviving* in the corporate McVersity but actually *thriving*, and also from my own experiments at pushing organisational boundaries to breaking point, I offer three principles for dwelling in the ruins of the university; three precepts for a new scholarship of practice.

### Be good

The first and by far the most important requirement for the new scholarship is to *be good* in every sense of the word. It perhaps goes without saying that we should try to be good in the moral sense, that is, to do the right thing (or perhaps, to do the thing that we believe is right). In other words, I am advocating a values-based scholarship in which we consider the intrinsic worth of what we do as researchers, teachers and scholars, as well as the instrumental,

outcomes-based reasons for our work. However, a values-based approach to scholarship is not necessarily incompatible with satisfying our university's goals-driven KPIs. The philosopher, Richard Sennett (2008), invokes the somewhat neglected idea of craftsmanship, and argues that quality arises from doing what we care about without too much thought as to the material gain that might or might not arise from it. As we have seen, this is diametrically opposed to the corporate notion of quality, which equates it explicitly with quantifiable profit and gain. We need to have faith that good, high quality work will be recognised, valued and rewarded on its own merits.

Closely linked to the moral issue of being good is the obligation and commitment that many of us have to our profession. Unlike most of our colleagues in the university, as healthcare professionals we sometimes run up against conflicts between meeting our contractual obligations to the university and meeting our moral and professional obligations to our practice disciplines, including our commitment to upholding and promoting our professional codes of conduct. Most professional codes of conduct, including my own, are proactive rather than passive. The code of conduct for nursing does not merely caution me to do no harm, but rather obliges me to do *good* by making the care of people my *first* concern. It suggests, therefore, that when I set out a research proposal or write a paper for publication, my first priority should be that it will contribute to the betterment of healthcare practice, rather than to the greater glory and profit of my university. This might mean, for example, that I conduct a small-scale, action research project that will have a direct impact on patient care, rather than a large, funded study whose findings might never be implemented. Or that I publish my research report in a professional journal with a low impact factor where it will be read by the maximum number of practitioners. Of course, we all have to meet our contractual obligations to our university in order to keep our jobs and, perhaps, to compete for promotion, but I am suggesting that we can meet these goals by doing what is good for our profession, for the health service, and for users of the service.

However, we will only be able to survive in the corporate university if we are also good in the other sense of the word. If we choose a path that to some extent challenges and subverts the mission of the university, then we must be excellent at what we decide to do in place of the corporate mission of grant capture and publication in high impact journals. My own experience suggests that it *is* possible to swim against the tide, but that it takes strength, stamina and a strong belief in the value of what we are doing. It also entails thinking creatively about what we might offer to the university in the place of what they are expecting from us. I could outline in some detail how I am trying to make a difference to nursing and healthcare practice in my own work, but I believe that each of us as individuals has to work out our own contribution to the greater good. And, in the end, we just have to *do* it. There is a saying that it is easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission, but my experience is that if what you do has real value and is done well, then there should be nothing to forgive.

## **Be collegiate**

The pressure generated by research assessment exercises, by performance-driven management and by the scramble to win research grants has created a culture of competition between and within universities that simply did not exist 20 years ago. During the past few years I have witnessed disputes between colleagues about whose names should be included on research papers, about the order in which those names should appear, about who 'owns' the paper for REF purposes, and about who should be the principal investigator on research grant bids.

I believe that we must resist and reject this corporate market economy culture of competition, which is anti-educational and counter to the co-operative spirit of nursing and the healthcare professions. In its place, we must develop a new collegiality based on shared values and a common desire to be good. However, collegiality does not seek to avoid confrontation, challenge and critical discourse. Critique of a colleague's work is the highest form of respect that we can pay to it; it suggests that we have read their work closely, have taken it seriously, and have put aside the time and effort to respond to it. The purpose of critique is not to shut down dispute and discussion but rather to keep it alive. We therefore need to be open to critique from colleagues and to be prepared to offer it at every opportunity; we must think our own thoughts and be prepared to listen, share and learn from the thoughts of others.

## Be radical

The word 'radical' derives from the Latin *radix*, meaning roots. To be radical, therefore, entails a reflection on where we have come from, as well as a return to our roots as healthcare professionals. This does not necessarily mean returning to practice; it means re-engaging with the values of practice and with the mission of practice development; that is, with helping to make things better for service users and providers.

The pressures exerted by the corporate agenda of the McVersity present us with a number of barriers to engaging in practice development, and many colleagues no longer feel that it is a feasible or even a valid aspect of the role of the academic. For example, as part of an ongoing debate about what nurse education is for, two eminent professors of nursing recently wrote:

Practice development should be done by people in practice and not by people in universities, the vast majority of whom have, to all intents and purposes, left practice. Practice development is a diversion from academic activity and, literally, an alternative to academic enquiry. (Thompson and Watson 2008, p.74)

In the spirit of collegiate critique, I would like to advance the counter argument that *radical* nursing scholarship encompasses practice development as its most important and vibrant component; that it should be undertaken as a partnership between practitioners and academics (and, wherever possible, service users); that it is not necessary to be *in* practice to make an active contribution *to* practice; that rather than being a diversion from academic activity, it should constitute an essential component of the activity of *all* nursing academics; and, finally, that it is an important and relevant form of academic enquiry in its own right.

To engage in practice development as an academic activity and as a form of academic enquiry means to think again about the relationship between research, teaching, theory and practice, to recognise and foster the connections between them, and to promote the importance of theorising our practice and practising our theory. This suggests that we need also to get back to our roots as educationalists, and to remember why we chose education and research as our nursing specialism in the first place. For me, it was not because I wanted to score highly in the Research Excellence Framework, to manage research teams and budgets, to publish papers in journals that would only be read by other academics, or to teach students how to pass assignments. Like many of my colleagues, I came into nurse education in order to make a positive contribution to nursing *practice*.

This is becoming more and more difficult as the global recession begins to bite and the McVersity asserts its corporate agenda with ever more force. Although it is becoming more

difficult to make a difference, it is still possible. We need to be brave, we need to take chances and we need to speak out. Above all, we need to remember *why* we became nurses and healthcare practitioners in the first place.

## References



Boyer, E.L. (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Princeton, New Jersey

Drucker, P.F. (1966) *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to our changing society*. Harper and Row, New York

Forscher, B. (1963) Letter to the Editor. *Science*, 142, p.339

Habermas, J. (1970) 'Technology and science as ideology'. In *Toward a Rational Society*. Beacon Press, Boston

Heidegger, M. (1938) 'The age of the world picture'. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Harper and Row, New York, 1978

Heidegger, M. (1955) *Discourse on Thinking*. Harper and Row, New York

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. Penguin, Harmondsworth

Newman, J.H. (1858) *The Idea of a University*. University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, reprinted in 1982

Orwell, G. (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Martin Secker & Warburg, London



Readings, B. (1996) *The University in Ruins*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Schön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman*. Penguin Books, London

*Swansea University Strategic Plan, 2009–14*. Available at:  
[www.swansea.ac.uk/media/media,40519,en.pdf](http://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/media,40519,en.pdf)

Thompson, D. and Watson, R. (2008) Response to Rolfe, G, (2007) Nursing scholarship and the asymmetrical professor [Nurse Education in Practice, 7, 123–127] Asymmetrical professors – Unbalanced or misunderstood? *Nurse Education in Practice*, 8, pp.73–5

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Dr Elisabeth Clark for giving me the benefit of her considerable wisdom and experience in planning, writing and editing this paper.