**Extract from the concluding chapter of. *The Idea of the Public University: Discovering and Teaching Knowledge in a Confused World,* by Allan Patience (Routledge, 2022).**

**Disaggregating the mass higher education system**

Since the 1980s, in many Western economies, higher education systems have been aggregated into a mass unitary system, bringing what were formerly mainly vocational and technical training institutions into the university system. The rationale for this development was partly to address a perceived inequality between universities and vocational institutions and partly to make the financing of higher education more compliant with neoliberal policy imperatives. In most instances, the result has been a case study of mismatching and confusion. Older and well-off universities have emerged at the top of a hierarchy of the mass or aggregated system of universities, with newer and less well-off institutions page133image12663840struggling to maintain the semblance of being a university in any meaningful sense at all. As Gavan Butler has noted:

[R]esources are concentrated on the higher education of a small proportion of all post-secondary students, leaving the remainder to more straightforward occupations [...] and to education of lower cost and less complexity. To the students consigned (ostensibly on merit) to the second rank of institutions it is said that they do not have to bear the responsibilities that come with an education of the first rank, that agenda-setting and decisions can be left to ordained leaders, and that of course there is access to the opportunity of a first-rank education but that prospective students must be able to indicate that they can take advantage of it (2007: 47)

The aggregated system has ended up as a heterogenous range of tertiary educa- tion training institutes being transformed into new universities, or being merged with existing institutions, including former polytechnics, technical and further education (vocational) colleges, teachers’ colleges, colleges of nursing, and paramedical training institutes. Little thought has been put into anticipating the negative fallout from the aggregating process, much less in having measures in place to ameliorate it. Much of it was imposed from above by interfering governments. Some of the more powerful universities were able to cherry-pick institutions whose assets they saw as serving their interests, including infrastructure and in some cases personnel (especially administrative personnel). The clumsy aggregating of tertiary education systems abruptly ended what had been a relatively benign and sometimes very successful post-secondary binary education system that had developed from the late 1950s. It has left graduates of secondary education systems with only one pathway towards a career – that is, by enrolling in a university.

This one-size-fits-all strategy has been a disastrous failure, resulting in high dropout and failure rates, especially at first year university level in public universities across the neoliberalized economies (Gare, 2006). It has also seen a proliferation of narrowly specialized professional and vocational degree programmes in universities that have little or no liberal educating curricula in them. This is the very antithesis of what Newman advocated as the idea of a university. Its greatest weakness is that it fails to recognize that many students require a completely different post-secondary education path to that offered to them by traditional university pathways. Nor does it understand that another substantial cohort of students needs more time, *and more knowledge*, before deciding on what career they want to follow and therefore what academic qualifications are needed to take them towards it.

What is to be done? The answer will be found in intelligently disaggregating the current dysfunctional mass university system. In response to these failures in the British higher education system, Jones and Cunliffe argue for “a com- prehensive vision of national renewal [...] [in which] tertiary education should be *rebalanced away from universities,* creating the highest quality non-academic education *while allowing a diminished university sector to restore academic standards*” (italics added). They explain:

The guiding principle of this restructuring should be (1) that no academically capable young person should be denied the opportunity of degree-level study; but also (2) academically incapable or unmotivated people should not be pushed into university to meet arbitrary and destructive widening participation targets, or denied alternative routes of education and advancement (2020: 27)

Their plan for restructuring is threefold: (1) They call for the creation of what they refer to as “New Colleges of Technology” (in this chapter they are referred to as polytechnics). (2) They propose a system of liberal arts colleges (in this chapter they are referred to as liberal arts and sciences colleges). (3) They argue for the creation of what they call “super universities” (2020: 30–1). In proposing the disaggregation of the mass university system, this chapter elaborates on the ideas provided by Jones and Cunliffe.

***Reviving the polytechnic system***

Prior to the aggregating of higher education systems, the polytechnic higher education tradition in Europe and Britain was noteworthy for its curricula focusing particularly on engineering, technology, and the applied sciences, emphasizing skills training and offering vocationally oriented certificate, diploma, and degree programmes. Polytechnics were always meant to be *different from, but equal to* public universities (Pratt, 1997). They made necessary, useful, and innovative contributions to higher education – for example, the Ecole Polytechnique Universitaire de Lausanne (EPUL) which still teaches highly sought-after programs in civil, mechanical, electrical, and chemical engineering as well as architecture (Escher, 2018). Disaggregating their functions from the mass university and reviving polytechnics – and establishing new ones as required – should be expedited in order to develop world-class certificate, diploma, and bachelor of technology courses, with master’s and doctoral levels to be developed accordingly. (This should include a doctor of technology degree equivalent to the doctor of philosophy degree.)

In their report, Jones and Cunliffe note that what they want to label New Colleges of Technology “should retain a broad liberal ethos and curriculum that requires and enables students to take humanities and social science sub- jects alongside their core technical training” (2020: 30–1). This would require the transfer of a wide range of professional or vocational degree programmes from the public university into the polytechnic system. For example, engineering and allied and applied technologies, artificial intelligence technologies, art and design courses, town planning and landscape architecture, accounting and business studies, nursing, and paramedic courses. These and similar vocationally oriented programmes could be developed freely and creatively, uninhibited by the academic formalism and regulatory strictures of the university system. They are all programmes that Newman would describe as teaching “Useful knowledge”. He was at pains to point out that these programmes simply cannot be adequately presented within the academic culture of the liberal university. Liberating polytechnics from the constraints of the public university would enable them to flourish creatively and productively, far more so than they are able within the aggregated or mass university system.

***Liberal arts and sciences colleges***

For much of the post-war history of the public university, there has been a dam- aging imbalance between academic staff on the one hand who are researchers able to flaunt lucrative research grants and lists of publications, and on the other hand academic staff who see themselves first and foremost as teachers. As Maryellen Weimer once observed: “A wide variety of well documented and measurable inequities exist between those who excel in the classroom and those who do likewise in their research” (1997: 52). Her observation remains relevant today. The imbalance between teaching and research has often resulted in a devaluing of good teaching and of the good people who deliver it. There have been various attempts to redress this imbalance by offering annual awards for “good teaching” which claim to be able to identify academic staff who are innovative in their delivery of curricula and who are assessed by their peers, and through student evaluation questionnaires, to be worthy of whatever “teaching excellence” award is being offered by their university (Kember *et al.*, 2002). However, as Chism and Szabó have pointed out: “Despite the widespread use of awards to recognize excellence in teaching, little attention has been given to evaluating their impact” (1997: 186). Moreover, a detailed report on research into student questionnaires allegedly designed to evaluate lecturers’ teaching performances notes that little consideration is given to “the [mis]use of online student evaluation as a platform to harass, offend and, at times, threaten teachers in higher education” (Lakerman *et al.*, 2021).

Recognizing and valuing good teachers is not a well-established feature of the contemporary mass public university. As noted in Chapter 1, unless academic staff can also point to success in competing for research grants while publishing in authoritative academic journals, their progress in promotions rounds is likely to stall and they may even be subject to regular reviews that can result in the non-renewal of their contracts. This fetishizing of research is a serious disad- vantage to those talented teachers who love their chosen fields and who are able to convey both that love and the significance of their subjects to their students. In an empirical study that asked how higher education can deal well with good teachers, Gad Yair concluded: “Passionate professors who constitute personal relations with their students cannot be routinely administered” (2008: 459). Yair’s study highlights the fact that teachers who do love their chosen fields, who inspire their students, and whose interest in what and who they are teaching means that they are likely to be remembered and valued by their students for years after they graduate. Teaching, in short, is a relationship, what elsewhere has been described as “affective pedagogy” (Patience, 2008). It entails relatings between the teacher and student, often at very deep levels. Hence, the notion that teaching online can successfully replace most, if not all, face-to-face teaching in our universities is absurd as saying you can parent successfully online.

This is why a system of liberal arts and sciences colleges needs to be established, in which excellence in teaching is its most salient characteristic and which provides students with a broad, liberal grounding in the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. The convention that professional degree pro- grammes can be taught at undergraduate levels has to be rethought. Martha Nussbaum has pointed out: “The world around us is inescapably international. Issues from business to agriculture, from human rights to the relief of famine, call out imaginations to venture beyond narrow group loyalties and to consider the reality of distant lives” (1997: 10). Liberal arts and sciences colleges should provide young people with understandings of cultures, histories, languages, and economies other than their own, as well as the physical sciences. This is what Newman meant by “disinterested intellectual creativity and enquiry”. Only after they have attained a sound grounding in the liberal curriculum should students proceed to professional degrees – for example, in law, medicine, and teaching. This is where the liberal arts and sciences colleges can play a major role, as they have done in the US higher education system in the past.1