

The commodification of education: an academic dilemma

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Considerable tension and debate surround the increasing commercialisation of higher education. What follows is a poignant exploration of the shifting landscape of higher education, particularly in the context of Australian universities. It unfolds through a dialogue between two accounting professors (Professor Enlighten and Professor Disenchant) as they wrestle with the transformation of universities into corporate entities and the ensuing commercialisation of teaching and learning in the name of financial sustainability.

Through the metaphors of these two imaginary professors, two perspectives grapple with the complexity of this alteration, debating whether it is academia transforming into a profit-making corporation, the commercial world shaping academia or a mutual tango of transformation. This raises questions about the implications of this change, considering whether it is an essential adaptation or a forfeiting of academic purposes and values for financial viability.

The dialogue critiques the commodification of knowledge and the reduction of education to mere transactions. In doing so, it underscores the intrinsic value of higher education to inspire curiosity and advance intellectual growth, mourning its transformation into a degree-producing factory where financial product are packaged up for consumption.

Towards the end, two inner voices emerge, reflecting the writer's own contemplation of the subject. The first voice struggles to find a balance between market forces and the essence of academia, whilst the second cautions against the perils of conflating education with marketisation and the pursuit of financial surplus.

Professor Enlighten and Professor Disenchant, weary from the long day of teaching, research and administrative duties, assembled near the soft glow of a nightlight in a university office room, research papers scattered around, a silent spectator to the transformation at play. Their words, both a passionate expression of grief and critique, drifted through the cold night air.

Professor Enlighten: The university, once a beacon light of intelligence and wisdom,
Now a marketplace, where degrees are bundled and exchanged,
Where academics are traders, and students, mere buyers,
Is this the advancement of enlightenment to which we were alerted?

Professor Disenchant: The question, my dear friend, is not so straightforward,
Is it academia becoming a conglomerate? or
The ideas of business shaping academia, or
In their mutual tango, both moving along forevermore?

Professor Enlighten: Indeed, this is a puzzle, this commerce marching on,
Where student grades are products, and research rankings, the trades.
They have monetised intellectual thinking, commodified wisdom,
In the pursuit of revenue and surplus, what they have done?

Professor Disenchant: Yet, could it be, an essential vice?
An adaptation to live through, in a world full of capitalists and neocons?
Or a trading out of ideals, an infidelity of trust and ideals,
In the name of economy and efficiency, doing what they must?



Professor Enlighten: A university should stimulate, provoke the intelligent light,
Not be a mass-producing factory, churning degrees via production-lines,
burning oil from morning till midnight.

Learning is more than mere transactions, commerce, and financial predicament,
It's about nurturing curiosity, initiating interactions, valuing enlightenment.

Professor Disenchant: I see it too, this corporatisation and commercialisation,
Cloaked up as growth, innovation, digitalisation, and modernisation.

Yet it's a battle of narratives, a struggle between academic disenchantment and corporate power,
A tale of survival of the fittest, as the financial pressures tower.

To this end, from this professorial dialogue, two small voices resound in my mind:

Small voice 1: Maybe, in this transformation, an ecological balance we'll find,
Between market forces and the pursuit of knowledge and intellect,
Safeguarding academia remains as the fountain of life.

Small voice 2: Yet, some will argue, it's a dangerous mismatch,
When higher education for enlightenment and financial surpluses are the same.
In this grand struggle, one must question,
Is the price of knowledge, its own commodification and commercialisation?

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