Book review


Written from diverse disciplinary perspectives, Values in Higher Education is a collection of articles brought together to mark the centenary of the University of Leeds. The text is organised into two section, dealing firstly with explicating 'the values' (chapters one to nine) and secondly with articulating values as they are/might be enacted in practice (chapters ten to seventeen). Part One holds a certain fascination, covering aspects of civic values, faith, democratic knowledge, citizenship and the contribution that feminism/s has made to higher education pedagogies. In general, however, there was also much that left me with a sense of tedium. It was the second section that held my attention. The chapters contained herein cover ethics in research, globalisation, student support as well as spirituality.

I am not sure that the collection lives up to the promise of the back-cover publicity blurb to "put down benchmarks for the debate on values in Higher Education". Given its raison d'être and given further that the majority of contributors "have a clear connection to the university" (p.1), it is not surprising that, with notable exceptions, the flavour tends towards the local rather than the global. It is in that sense that I feel speaking of 'benchmarks for the debate' is somewhat of a stretch. Nevertheless, there are enough parallels to be drawn with developments in the Higher Education sector in other western nations like Australia for the volume to be of some interest to a non-British audience.

Much of the discussion of what values in education are or ought to be is interesting reading and while some aspects of the debate over a 'crisis in values' intrigued me, it all felt rather flat. That Higher Education is said to be 'in crisis' is certainly not confined to Britain. Just what the tell-tale signs of such a crisis might be is, of course, context specific and is moreover, open to interpretation. In fact, I would suggest that 'in crisis' is frequently short-hand for 'institutional change' and while I am quite aware that I may be going out on a rather fragile limb, it seems to me that we ought not to confuse "the culture clash between 'invariant values' of education and the values of the liquid-modern age" (p.3) with questions of who and what is successful in the funding stakes, or questions about industrial relations and workplace conditions.

In the second section of the book there are two fields of inquiry into values in Higher Education that particularly captured my imagination. Maybe my sense of what ought to be considered as 'values' in the new millennium is more limited but for me questions of ethics in research as well as questions about diversity and inclusivity with regard to universities' student populations -and the impact this has on teaching - are key concerns in my professional life. Other readers may have other concerns.

Clement Katalushi, in his chapter "Diversity, values and international students in higher Education", for example, raises important issues concerning the globalisation of Higher Education and takes to task (albeit more gently than it deserves) the economic rationale that underpins the phenomenon of intense competition for the 'international student dollar', as well as the ethnocentric approaches of western universities towards international students. Enough said of the former. The latter point, however, bears further explication because it goes to the heart of whether we are only really interested in making as much money as we can from the international student market or whether we are indeed practising versions of cultural respect that are so often writ large in university vision and/or mission statements. The author argues a number of points regarding a wide range of questions quite persuasively. To give but a small example, and without doing justice to the breadth of his argument, Katalushi suggests that well-meaning induction programs designed for international students that seek to minimise 'culture shock' can often be "simply a means through which one culture is enabled to dominate and inhibit another [...] students are made to feel that the only way they can achieve is by way of holding their own cultures and values in abeyance" (p. 195). That comment in particular, resonated most powerfully. I have a sense that administrators who recruit and 'manage' international students would benefit
enormously from reading this chapter in its entirety. As the author implies, a world-class university is one that pays attention to the duties of care we owe to the global community.

I also found the discussions contained in Nafstad's contribution "Assumptions and values in the production of knowledge" of particular interest because in many ways it was the most thought-provoking chapter in the collection. Not only did it really wrestle with the question of 'values' but she also challenged the reader to think about ethics as a "moral interest in shaping one's discipline so that it serves and improves society and human life" (p. 158). Beginning with the premise that "ethics as a subject represents the systematic investigation of and arguments about good and bad, right and wrong", the author argues that ethics within research is "quickly reduced to arguments about rules, prescriptions and prohibitions for coping with clients" (p. 150). I expect that many of us in the social sciences have more than a passing familiarity with this type of approach where the chief aim seems to be "to complete application forms in order to pass formal ethical committees and ensure future publication" (p.151). Instead, Nafstad argues for what she refers to as 'area ethics' an approach that is concerned less with totalising rules and more with the specifics of the discipline and one's own perspective and conceptual framework. While she uses the field of psychology as an example, clear parallels can be drawn to research in other areas of the social sciences.

In choosing to focus primarily on two chapters from this volume, my professional concerns and pre-occupations as well as my biases are indeed made plain and that is perhaps, par for the course when reviewing a volume dealing with values in education. Further, given the ways in which over the last decade or so I have experienced an erosion of values that are important to me in my professional career, it is indicative of the times that normally I would not have had the leisure and perhaps not even the inclination to read a volume as such this. For me the central questions of the volume "What is the point of Higher Education" and "What value does it have for the individual or the nation?" are questions I have been known to debate over a glass of good red wine. They are important questions; especially over a glass of wine. Given the frenetic pace within my work place - a pace that signals that my colleagues and I are increasingly efficient and accountable - these are, however, not questions that occupy our time on a day to day basis. We are instead occupied with juggling the holy trinity of teaching, research and administrivia. More is the pity.

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