

## CHAPTER 3

# The Failure of Public Higher Education Reform in North America and Western Europe

## The Need for a New Beginning

Davydd Greenwood

*Cornell University, USA*

### Abstract

A consistent set of criticisms of the organisation, dynamics, and failings of public higher education (HE) has been articulated since the early 1990s. Most are on target and point to a system in freefall—expensive, ineffective, and unsatisfactory for students, faculty, many staff members, and the relevant communities they serve. Despite this, the situation in HE in North America and Europe has only worsened as neoliberal management continues to intensify management by the numbers, control of student and faculty speech, administrative bloat, and increases in tuition costs. The consequent decline in public and employer support and the

### How to cite this book chapter:

Greenwood, D. (2024). The failure of public higher education reform in North America and Western Europe: The need for a new beginning. In L. Wood & O. Zuber-Skerritt (Eds.), *Shaping the future of higher education: Positive and sustainable frameworks for navigating constant change* (pp. 45–69). Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134-HUP-25-3>.

approaching significant decline in birth rates, and consequently in the number of college-age students in Western industrialised countries, have not moved the powerholders in these institutions to reform the institutions in fundamental ways. I argue that piecemeal public university reforms no longer hold any promise. Only a fundamental re-creation of public HE will change the situation. This re-creation must be based on open systems dynamics, transdisciplinarity, and a focus on sustainability for the stakeholders (the faculty and students, the surrounding communities, and the larger planetary ecology). The chapter closes with an examination of what such public institutions might be like.

### Preamble

Through 44 years of efforts within an academic department, I have learned that attempts to tweak the existing structure of both public and private higher education (HE) in positive and dynamic directions do not work. My academic experience ranges beyond teaching and research to include participation in and then leadership of four interdisciplinary, university-wide programmes (including 18 years as an interdisciplinary centre and programme director), serving as head of a national taskforce to authorise legislation on foreign language and area studies in HE, and a term as President of the Association of International Educators. Between 1970 and about 1985, I experienced the period of unprecedented growth and expansion of innovative, transdisciplinary, and community-oriented academic engagement in universities and colleges. However, developments from about 1985 on, during the Reagan administration, signalled the start of the neoliberal assault on higher education—in other words, institutionalising the neoliberal view of education as job training rather than as personal and citizen development. This included cutbacks in public funding for education and the appearance of the so-called ‘audit culture’ that requires employees to be accountable by quantifying what they do during their paid work hours, supposedly to maximise the value of employees’ work (labelled ‘productivity’) to their employer. The

substance and quality of academic performance is excluded from this assessment (Strathern, 2000).

This assault has gained momentum ever since. The gains made between 1945 and 1985 in HE in terms of relevant research, social inclusion, support for creativity, and a general lack of censorship have all been reversed. At present, we see United States public universities subjected to individual state mandates against teaching about race, slavery, genocide, gender differences, and anything else that offends straight white supremacists. The problem of authoritarian control and censorship is no longer limited to countries ruled by dictators, as it now directly affects supposedly democratic countries. Under these conditions, I argue that what is required is nothing less than a fundamental re-creation of public education (primary, secondary, and higher) and their socio-political mission at each level.

Building on decades of experience with industrial democracy and worker-owned cooperatives, I argue for a fundamental structural redesign of public HE, following the principles of socio-technical systems design and active political participation by all categories of stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, students, and community members). This will not solve the larger political problem of extreme right-wing domination of the political arena and the reciprocally strident authoritarian, supposedly left-wing responses. But it is, at least, a proposal for how to seek a better way forward. Conforming to the current conditions and trying to reform them is not an option—not for universities, for society, or for the planetary ecosystem. In this chapter, I focus only on HE.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the concepts of closed and open systems and learning organisations. Following this is an examination of the multiple ways universities do not show the central features of these systems. Using the distinction between Tayloristic (closed) organisational structures and matrix (open) organisational structures and processes, I characterise universities in their current form in Western industrialised countries as hierarchical, siloed, and authoritarian systems operating in environments that actually require open, collaborative matrix

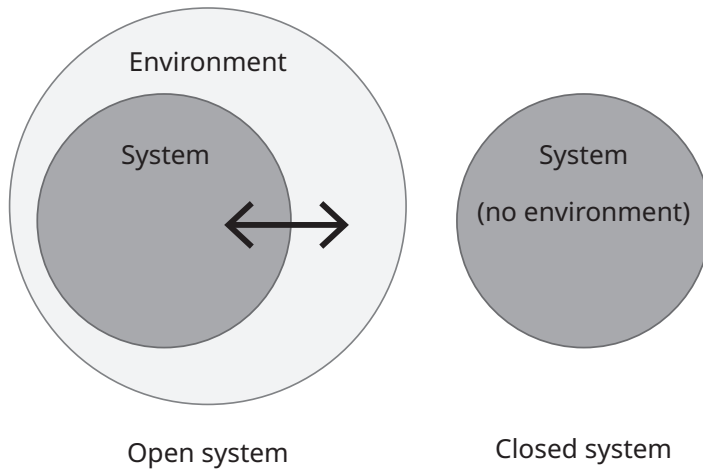
systems if they are to survive and fulfil their societal missions. I close the chapter by portraying what an open system matrix organisation university would be like, a model that cannot be brought into being by reforming current universities and instead requires re-creating universities as open systems from the bottom up. I begin by clarifying the general concepts and ideas that underpin this analysis—open and closed systems, organisational behaviour, and learning organisations.

### **Closed and open systems and learning organisations**

A key distinction in systems theory and in the study of organisational dynamics is between closed and open systems. Closed systems address challenges from their environment and from within by intensifying or decreasing activities within. For example, if an organisation is producing a higher number of defective parts than it should, managers double down on the workers and pressure them to do better, rather than inquiring why and how the defective parts are being produced and altering the system of production.

Open systems, like all living systems, respond to the need to maintain a liveable equilibrium. They take in forces coming from the environment, reorganise their internal processes to develop sustainable equilibria, and alter their boundaries and how they work as necessary. For example, an organisation producing a higher number of defective parts than is acceptable will check the inputs coming from the environment, examine the manufacturing processes and equipment to pinpoint the places where the problems are being created, seek information and suggestions from everyone involved, and then design or redesign altered processes or adjustments to the machinery to produce better outcomes.

The human dynamics of closed and open systems are therefore radically different. Closed systems are authoritarian and defensive, while open systems are more tolerant of change and are more inquiry-oriented in learning how to accomplish the changes they



**Figure 3.1:** Open and closed systems.

Source: Modified from <https://opensystemsperspective.weebly.com/comparison.html>.

need to do better. Figure 3.1 illustrates the relationship of these two systems—within (open system) and without (closed system)—to the environment. Learning organisations are necessarily open systems.

Although universities are dedicated to learning and teaching, they are not therefore ‘learning organisations’. The concept ‘learning organisation’ derives from a long genealogy of general systems theory, action science, and action research (Kleiner, 2008). A learning organisation:

- provides continuous learning opportunities,
- uses learning to reach their goals,
- links individual performance with organisational performance,
- fosters inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks,
- embraces creative tension as a source of energy and renewal, and
- is continuously aware of, and interacts with, its environment (Kerka, 1995).

Those in contemporary universities and colleges would likely testify that their experiences in such institutions do not match these characteristics of learning organisations. Despite the presence of highly educated and often motivated professors and students and at least some administrative staff who believe that the mission of the institutions centres on learning and teaching, most respondents to questions about their university/college experience would surely say no. Universities are discipline-bound, siloed, increasingly hierarchical organisational systems under authoritarian management. Hierarchy and internal competition using audit culture numbers is the principal dynamic within units, between units, and among universities themselves. This argument hardly requires development, as it is so often repeated that it is well known.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their differences, all these analyses have in common a critique of HE institutions as Tayloristic organisations. Taylorism, named after F. W. Taylor and popularised in his book *The principles of scientific management* (Taylor, 1911), is not a learning organisation system. It is just the opposite. The Tayloristic system and its components are designed by efficiency experts and managers, and tasks and resources are allocated to ‘workers’ whose actions are defined in advance and whose performance is judged by their superiors. The lower-level workers are reduced to being working hands, while design, decision-making, discipline, and compensation are decided by the managers at the apex of the organisation and now by the investors in stock corporations that often have nothing to do with education.

Universities are organised in disciplinary departmental silos with their own internal hierarchies reaching down from full, associate, and assistant professors, then lecturers, teaching assistants, research assistants, secretaries, etc. Each silo reports upward to a Dean (or similarly named head), who oversees the distribution of resources among the silos, provoking and gaining power from the competition among them. The Dean reports upwards to what is now an army of vice-provosts, provosts, vice-presidents, treasurers, bursars, human resource departments, buildings and

properties departments, security and police, etc. These titles may vary by country and by institution. At the pinnacle, far from the teaching and research processes, is the President (or Vice Chancellor or Rector, depending on the country). Power, money, space, and other support are sent downwards from the pinnacle, which is far removed from the actual sites of value production in the institutions. All these activities by academic staff are summed up numerically according to the number of publications they have produced, the journals they publish in and the prestige ranking of journals for these publications, the amount of research grants awarded to them, etc., without any substantive connection to and therefore evaluation of what is taught, what is researched, and what is published (unless it produces a high-income patent, a public relations coup, or disaster for the institution). In other words, quality of academic performance and contributions are not really in this picture; evaluation is almost all about numbers.

While this Tayloristic departmental structure dates back to the 19th century, the advent of Thatcherism/Reaganism put the neo-liberalism of Milton Friedman and his colleagues at the University of Chicago, known as the 'Chicago Boys,' into the central place as an organisational and political technology. Now numerical evaluation, disciplinary ranking, and institutional ranking trump all other aspects of university life. It has made a huge amount of money for banks and other investors, as the cost of these Tayloristic systems has ballooned and driven tuition fees up so far that few families can send their children to universities without taking on high-interest bank loans. These measures discourage not just potential students without financial access. They also discourage academic collaboration and long-term research projects and have lowered the funding available for theoretical scientific research in favour of funding for applied research with supposedly immediate economic benefits.

This critique has been put forward in both the general literature on organisational structures and behaviour by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (Argyris & Schön, 1996) and for universities as organisations by Gibbons, Nowotny, and Peters (Gibbons et al.,

1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). For example, Gibbons, Nowotny, and Peters use the language of Mode 1 research and Mode 2 research. Mode 1 research is produced within academic institutions independent of the external context and is dictated by the dynamics of the various disciplinary fields. Mode 2 is research carried out in the context of application, outside of the university, in partnership with external stakeholders, and focused on the transdisciplinary problems important to those external stakeholders. What these framings make clear is that no Tayloristic university organisation can operate in a Mode 2 way. Tayloristic organisations change only by intensifying or de-intensifying what they are already doing without changing their structures and dynamics. They are fragile, dependent on stable and permissive external environments, and relatively impervious to learning.

It should be obvious why being a learning organisation is a basic requirement for universities to survive as a key institution in democratic societies. The environment in which universities exist has become globalised, turbulent, and increasingly competitive and unstable. Closed-system responses to these challenges still dominate the world of HE. Put simply, they will not work over the long run.

### *The organisational structure and dynamics of learning organisations*

Learning organisations are complex both to structure and to operate because they require the capability to assess the changing requirements of their environments. They also need to be able to organise and reorganise the resources at their disposal to adapt to these changes and innovate by anticipating paths of future change that may enhance the survivability of their organisation. For a more detailed view of these concepts and their deployment, see Ravn et al. (2023).

All learning organisations rely on collaboration, participation, sharing knowledge and experience, relatively flat organisational structures (i.e. matrix organisational structures), and intentional

continuous gathering of information and exploring adaptive possibilities in the external environment. To operate in this way requires two kinds of participation. One is *political participation*, where hierarchy is replaced by processes of negotiation in which all the organisational members have a say, well-managed decision processes are developed, and key organisational decisions are made by a cross-section of the members who all have relevant knowledge to contribute. Command-and-control systems are replaced by facilitative management and leadership by example.

To be effective in practical terms, the organisations also have to be efficient, dynamic producers of their products and/or services. This requires the second kind of participation, which is called *socio-technical participation*. Here all the members of the organisation play a role in designing, maintaining, and improving the relationship between the technologies and processes the organisation depends on and therefore the welfare of the stakeholders in the organisation. This welfare includes living wages, healthcare, and respect for employee experience and suggestions. In such organisations, socio-technical deliberations in the face of new problems to solve, or to create innovative process improvements, become central problem-solving approaches. Using more fully the knowledge, experience, ideas, and motivation of the members of the organisation puts more human intelligence at the service of the organisation's overall ability to adapt to the relevant environments. To succeed over the long-term, learning organisations need to be effective in managing and reconciling the demands of both political and socio-technical participation processes. Managers are coordinators, orchestrators, and supporters, not 'bosses'. Equipped with understanding of the concepts and distinctions above, we can now turn to analysing the current crises of universities.

### The current crisis

In the United States of America (USA), maintaining and intensifying the Fordist–Taylorist structures and processes in colleges

and universities has not only created unliveable workplaces, but has also resulted in closing down or at least significantly reducing the social mobility of working and lower middle-class people through HE. It has created falling enrolments in HE, massive increases in senior administrative ranks and therefore salary costs, out-of-control infrastructure costs, casualisation of 75 per cent of the faculty, and attacks on professorial tenure. Disturbingly, we have come to experience state-by-state political control over what can be said, published, and taught by faculty in public universities and colleges. Unsurprisingly, despite the neoliberal justification that the audit culture and the 'new public management' are the only path to economic rationality in HE, a clear result in the USA is removal of the need for a HE degree from many corporate and public job announcements. Employers have found that university graduates no longer are necessarily more valuable employees (see for instance, the articles available in the links listed in the footnote).<sup>2</sup> If this employer movement becomes a groundswell, combined with the declining birth rates that the USA and Europe are facing, and decreasing numbers of students from South and East Asia who previously made up for this demographic decline, the days of many universities and colleges are numbered. A radical reorganisation of public universities alone will not solve these problems, but it is a necessary component in any attempt to do so. I argue that the current model is broken beyond repair.

The complex history of HE is not easy to summarise. In the USA, for example, there are over 4,000 HE institutions, including private universities, public universities, private colleges, public colleges, religious colleges, technical schools, community colleges, and a variety of for-profit HE organisations. Summarising these institutions has become easier in the last few decades as institutional differences have been overwhelmed by the neoliberal tidal wave and the imposition of the 'audit culture' on research and teaching and on the national and international ranking of institutions (Strathern, 2000). The 'new public management' (Behn, 2001) is basically management by the numbers, premised on not trusting that those being evaluated and ranked will do their jobs

well unless they are held to account. The premise is that without the accountability imposed on employees by audit culture, they would not do their work well and would waste resources. Here we see the contradiction between on the one hand the orthodoxy of neoliberalism, with the idea that all economic decisions should be based on rational choice and that doing so will produce ideal and harmonious outcomes, and on the other hand the enormously heavy hand of coercion by the numbers to 'force' rational choice. It is the hallmark of a pseudoscientific ideology.

These practices have been in effect long enough for their consequences to be well known. Education is converted into siloed vocational training. Students are converted into customers who supposedly are 'always right'. Faculty are converted into fee-for-service providers rather than teachers and researchers. Curricula are modified according to student demand, leading to, among other consequences, a radical disinvestment in the humanities and social sciences. Curricula are also modified to conform to neoliberal ideologies of radical individualism and blindness to history, class, race-ethnicity, and gender. This tends to produce a highly individuated, passive, consumerist worker who will 'fit in' to existing corporate power structures.

This transformation is now taking place, at least in the USA, in the midst of a concerted ideological attack on universities as supposed hotbeds of left-wingers who are oppressors of poor, defenceless 'pseudoconservatives'. While this trope has been seen before in the history of HE, in the USA it has now been pushed far beyond a trope to legislation against teaching about race-ethnicity, gender, climate change, and social history. The State of Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, is leading this movement. He sought to bolster his run for president of the United States with his dramatic performances in prohibiting the use of state funds to teach about race, diversity, and gender at the public universities in his state. He has also defined state university faculty and administrators as public employees, and claimed that as a state governor he therefore has the right to censor what they say and write.<sup>3</sup> Recently he has begun an attack on professorial tenure, even though the share

of tenured positions in USA universities has been slashed to below 25 per cent of total professorial positions as compared with 80 per cent at the end of the 1960s,<sup>4</sup> while the number of academics on term and part-time contracts has been increased dramatically. The Florida governor is not alone, as this effort has been joined by governors in other states, and this movement is spreading quickly.

These so-called reforms were in fact accomplished with surprising ease, because of the pathologies of HE organisations. Such institutions were already intensely siloed and hierarchical by the end of the 19th century, and the long period of sustained growth after World War II not only did not correct these counterproductive organisational habits but intensified them. Particularly after the 1960s, departments and disciplines were made into mini cartels run by senior faculty in an academic and professional world of their own. Colleges competed with other colleges for resources, space, and ranking. Increasingly, faculty offloaded administrative tasks to professional administrators to liberate themselves to teach and research without 'wasting time' on institutional processes. This trend has developed to the point where universities can now compete with international investment banks for being among the most Tayloristic institutions on the planet. My long-term employer, Cornell University, used to publish online its organisational charts, but now reveals them only unit by unit. When the charts were published online a decade ago, they ran to about 30 pages of boxes. Tellingly, the lowest boxes on the charts included only the deans of colleges. The faculty and students were absent entirely.

Leading-edge, world-class manufacturing and service organisations largely have abandoned such Tayloristic structures as impediments to efficiency, as they are costly, static, and demoralising. These organisations have moved towards flattening organisational hierarchies, promoting teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, and treating management as coordination rather than 'bossing'. This approach is not evident in university organisation, particularly in larger institutions. Indeed, university hierarchy has been intensified particularly through staffing at

upper levels, with increases in administrative staffing made at the cost of decreases in academic staffing.

In the USA, the number of administrative staff has been boosted massively, with some calculations putting the increase in spending on administration per student as high as 61 per cent between 1993 and 2007.<sup>5</sup> Many of these administrative staff are high-end appointees who are paid significant salaries, dramatically increasing the overall costs of running a university, while not necessarily investing increased resources in educating students. During the same time, faculty numbers were increased only between 5 and 10 per cent, and much of that increase was in the poorly paid contract and part-time faculty.<sup>6</sup>

These shifts in staff ranks speak to the reinforcing of university hierarchy in the hands of administrative/managerial staff at the expense of academic staff. Humanities and social science departments have been disbanded or consolidated. Buildings and properties budgets have been increased dramatically, including support for recreational facilities. In parallel, student housing and dining have been made an ancillary business opportunity, particularly for private service providers.

This 'administrative bloat' not only entrenches the existing Tayloristic features of these institutions, but also increases their cost of 'doing business', and so by extension, what they charge students as tuition fees. For the past 20 years in the USA, increases in tuition and room and board costs to students have routinely been double the rate of inflation. This has created a student debt crisis that burdens young graduates with a level of debt that slows their creation of a family and/or purchase of a home, or actually pushes them into bankruptcy. It also influences their career choices, inclining them to pursue careers that seem to produce high incomes quickly. Increasingly, working and lower middle-class families question the value of this investment in HE.

Two additional issues further complicate this picture. One is the significant decline in the size of the future student population in many countries, as was already evident a couple of decades ago. In the USA the decline has been made up for by a strategy of

increasing the presence of international students, initially mostly from India and China, but now from anywhere they are willing to come from, if they have capacity to pay. Years ago, I heard enrolment recruiters cynically refer to these students as ‘filler’. Now the powerful combination of COVID, destabilisation of the global order by Russia, China, and other authoritarian states, and the ever more severe impacts of climate change have disrupted these flows of students and created increasing problems of recruitment. Recruitment difficulties are deepened while more nations, and institutions within them, are competing to attract international students, and more high-level students, such as in China, are choosing to pursue HE in their home country. When this is combined with an obsession to rank institutions by their ‘selectivity’ scores—the most ‘selective’ institutions being the most highly ranked—it creates impossible organisational contradictions for an already overpriced and lethargic Tayloristic system.

The second issue is increasing evidence that private sector employers of university graduates are dissatisfied with the training these graduates received at university. More and more business leaders complain that the students are not well trained in their fields, are not good problem-solvers, do not work well in multidisciplinary team contexts, and are not good at learning how to learn. Whether these perceptions are well founded matters less than the trend they have inspired in many business environments to eliminate the requirement for a HE credential in job announcements.

On the research side, current structures steer academics into chasing research funds that will cover overhead costs and in relevant academic fields will produce patents that enhance university coffers. These arrangements promote short-term research projects and undercut basic research. This stunts what is ultimately the source of significant applied research outcomes. It sets up among academic researchers the perceived need for entrepreneurship to keep a research shop open. That causes most senior faculty to leave their labs to more junior staff and convert themselves into managers, which is another cause of burnout among senior fac-

ulty. This structure for awarding research grants and evaluating/rewarding the projects they fund has made the scientific, social, practical, and ethical importance of research projects secondary to the amount of research and patent money that researchers bring in. In a HE climate that is already unproductive or even stifling for them, the social sciences and the humanities are also at a distinct disadvantage in research. Much less research money is made available to them, and often the research findings of social scientists and humanists upset powerful outsiders. All of these forces add up to a 'perfect storm' in which a great many HE institutions will fall by the wayside.

It is well known that decisions made at distance from the locus of value production (in this case, teaching, research, and community engagement) are generally badly designed. Often, they are counterproductive, poorly implemented, and deepen rather than resolve problems. The current administrative response is to double down on what created the problem in the first place, which usually makes the problem worse. Tayloristic managers are not just ignorant of the facts, which organisational distance creates. They are also unaware that their command-and-control staff structures and use of numbers as a substitute for substantive knowledge of the issues create a situation in which their staff find it difficult to give the managers feedback they do not want to hear. These staff members effectively serve at the pleasure of their superiors, who are better paid, are invested with institutional authority, and are often on a career path leading to what they recognise as ever better institutions, foundation presidencies, and government appointments. Having explained the problems with the current status of HE, I now move on to present some ideas for a better future.

### **Ideas: Higher education as sustainable, dynamic, and learning organisations**

The work on socio-technical systems design, collaborative learning and action, and political participation offers lessons that

almost all HE institutions have not learned (see Wright & Greenwood, 2017). Details of socio-technical systems design would take us beyond the remit of this chapter, but certain basics are key to our discussion. To begin, this perspective treats the factory or service organisation as a collaborative learning arena in which all members are stakeholders and valued participants. The organisation's aim is to gather the different experiences, expertise, ideas, and motivations of its members to identify and analyse problems, fashion and implement solutions, evaluate their effectiveness, and then continue the cycle as circumstances change. This is what a learning organisation does. A long list of case studies shows how much more effective, efficient, and morale boosting this approach is over other approaches such as the likes of Taylorism (Gustavsen & Hunnius, 1981; Kleiner, 2008; Trahair, 2015; Trist, 1981; Whyte, 1991).

While socio-technical systems design is instrumentally oriented, it has important political-moral dimensions. Successful socio-technical systems cannot work in an organisational structure that treats power as authority exercised down from the apex. Rather, all the stakeholders are understood to be political actors. Power relations have to be negotiated in concert with the decisions being made in the learning community that have an instrumental focus. This combination of teamwork and collaboration creates organisations in which all members have a say about both their role and the activities and goals of the organisation. These organisations built on socio-technical systems design generally have low salary differentials between the lowest- and highest-paid members. The money that these organisations do not spend on high salaries for managers is available to the organisation for its own investment and development. As well as their political and moral virtues, these organisations are capable of being flexibly adaptive to the changes and challenges created by the environments in which they operate. A detailed presentation of the structures and dynamics of socio-technical systems design organisations can be found in a recent special issue of the *International Journal of*

*Action Research* (Ravn et al., 2023). So, what would universities that are learning organisations be like?

From my point of view, universities are educational institutions that teach new generations a combination of the skills, information, social values, and ways to learn how to learn throughout life as a contributing member of society. Since we cannot do what we do not know, there is a direct relationship between teaching and learning. Students learn the results of research and how to undertake research and get research results themselves.

Universities exist to serve the common good through research and teaching, and through direct engagement in analysing and providing support for solutions to societal problems. This takes place in real environments that are dynamic, conflictive, and often intensely problematic. Issues like planetary ecological collapse, massive socio-economic inequality within and between countries, race–ethnic oppression, gender prejudice, and expansive authoritarianisms and cultural supremacist movements must be addressed. These issues do not come in neat disciplinary packages to be doled out to each mini cartel by a boss and then magically added up to create comprehensive understanding of these complex, interacting problems and provide workable solutions.

The structure of these problems requires that teaching and research are combined, and that sustained transdisciplinary teamwork accumulates, synthesises, and expands understanding of the problems so that solutions can be envisioned. And, given the nature and scale of problems, it is clear universities cannot be isolated from society, but must take in non-university stakeholders as part of these efforts. Doing so gains for them much-needed non-academic knowledge and a secure commitment to the relevant external stakeholders being involved in enacting solutions.

Universities have occasionally approached this kind of strategy, but only in exceptional times and when there is massive external support. The Manhattan Project, the space exploration programmes, and the sequencing of human DNA are examples of this. However, once the external funding and social pressure abates, universities fall right back to reliance on their Tayloristic

silos. This means the overall organisational structure of the university would have to be altered to convert universities into sustainable learning organisations.

In a recent book, Morten Levin and I laid out a view of what a university would look like as a learning organisation (Levin & Greenwood, 2016), so here I will be brief. Organisationally, universities need to transmute into ‘matrix organisations’, with their members organised into multiple, multidimensional, transdisciplinary teams (including relevant external stakeholders) that focus on particular issues, problems, or functions. Experts from a variety of backgrounds, plus practitioners differently situated in the organisation, combine as a socio-technical systems team to define the problems, gather information about these problems, propose solutions, manage the needed resources, enact the proposed solutions, and evaluate the results. Students are members of these teams and are both mentored by other team members and acting as contributors to the teams’ work. The teams repeat the problem definition, research, action design, action, and evaluation cycle until the results of this research work meet the expectations of the stakeholders. After that, the team may dissolve or be reorganised to work on a different but related problem. Or the members may be seconded to other research teams where their knowledge and experiences are relevant and useful.

Leadership does exist in such organisations, but it is not based on a chain of command. Rather, leadership coordinates the search for the issues that need attention that the organisation can take on, helps compose and resource the teams, and assists in finding resources. It helps in connecting teams with outside stakeholders and can help manage conflicts or bottlenecks in the team processes when and if they occur. The functions of teaching, research, human resource management, accounting, and communication all continue as dimensions of each team. There is also an administrative leader in the university for each of these team functions. A team member—for example, someone with human resource responsibilities—can turn to the central human resource leader for support and problem-solving.

Low boundaries, flattened organisational hierarchies, support and rewards for collaboration, and flexibly dynamic teams are the key features here. Rather than the conventional organisational chart of Taylorism, a matrix organised university is composed of transdisciplinary teams coordinated and supported by a small central administration. Disciplinary departments would be treated only as sources of personnel and expertise in support of these transdisciplinary teams and would be evaluated according to the contributions they make toward various team efforts. Teaching and learning would be suffused throughout the team structures, with students doing a great deal of their learning in these transdisciplinary team environments.

This kind of organisational approach has been key to the successes of Norwegian companies, the Mondragon Cooperatives in Spain, Toyota, and many IT research and development organisations. It is, however, not on the immediate horizon of most universities I know of. This is because Tayloristic systems create many internal vested interests. Reducing the salary differential from the current seven-figure salaries of many university leaders to four or six times that of an entry-level professor or staff member strikes university leaders as an invitation for them to commit economic suicide. Requiring faculty to leave their mini cartels and interact with members of other mini cartels in search of shared learning and solutions to shared problems is the direct opposite of what the audit culture has promoted and continues to promote. Engaging university teams with external stakeholders opens up the possibilities of universities being engaged in conflicts over climate change, race-ethnic difference, gender differences, political power, and whatever social and cultural fracture lines the work crosses. These are conflicts that most current university leaders go through contortions to avoid.

Removing authoritarian command and control approaches to human resource management, promotions, merit pay, accounting, infrastructure improvement and maintenance, policing, dormitory management, resolving legal problems and the like would require a fundamental transformation of the working lives and

attitudes of all the personnel who are currently ‘adapted’ to the authoritarian structures. There is no reason to think that these organisations would spontaneously and smoothly adapt to these changes, nor that the current leadership (and even some of the ‘inmates’) would be willing to consider them. The possibility of converting current universities into learning organisations seems to me far-fetched. It is much more likely that this could happen only in the face of imminent collapse/bankruptcy or in the context of newly founded institutions.

A case where this has happened positively, by design, in a newly founded institution, is the Sabanci University in Turkey. It is a private university founded with an endowment from a very wealthy Turkish family but created through an action research process called a ‘search conference’. In this process, the organisational socio-technical and political participatory issues were sorted through to create the design for the institution. The story of the university can be explored on its website,<sup>7</sup> and this same process has been used to create two other universities in Turkey under the guidance of Oğuz Nuri Babüroğlu<sup>8</sup> of Arama Consulting and now a professor at the Sabanci University.<sup>9</sup> Such cases show that this matrix model for HE organisation works well and is sustainable. They also show that from a human point of view, the university modelled and operating as a learning organisation produces a much better place in which to work and live than the university operating on Taylorist business principles and philosophy.

## Postscript

My 44 years of experience in HE make me quite pessimistic about the likelihood of most universities transforming into learning organisations. Vested interests and inertia are likely to keep the Tayloristic system in place with governmental support from the neoliberal audit culture until the cataclysm that unravels it has already begun. If my understanding of the future global problems we face is correct, without a sudden reversal of the demographic decline in North America and Europe, and reversal of the re-

emergence of totalitarian regimes, many current universities will simply collapse. When that happens, it is essential to be ready with well-articulated and studied alternative models to put into play to fulfil the roles that functional universities can and should play in solving world problems.

Given the political and social turmoil in the world and the downward spiral of the planetary ecosystem, it is now urgent that we learn to apply the best of what we know collaboratively toward solutions to these broad human and planetary problems. Understanding and advocating a general systems view of human problems, and matching this to the organisation and operation of HE institutions as transdisciplinary learning communities well connected to external stakeholders, is no longer optional. Promoting such views, promoting organisational alternatives to HE ‘business-as-usual’, is the only way forward for all of us. I now suggest what needs to happen for HE to bring about a new beginning. Although I am not convinced that vested interests will support such suggestions, hopefully they may encourage some stakeholders in HE to at least begin to think about making changes.

### **Practical suggestions for consideration, discussion—and action**

1. Universities must make a concerted effort to reinvent themselves as learning organisations. An action learning and action research approach that requires all stakeholders to continually think about how to improve their practice to align with socio-technical organisational perspectives could be useful in this regard. This could be done by creating safe environments for inter-/transdisciplinary teams of administrators, academics, and management to dialogue about both internal and external factors affecting their missions of teaching, research, and community engagement and to apply creative thinking to find feasible pathways to improvement. The example of Sabanci

University provided in this chapter also offers a good example of how HE could do this.

2. Conducting action research to determine how a socio-technical organisational approach might be applied in HE in various contexts can help to find alternatives to the current neoliberal, Tayloristic modes of operation.
3. HE cannot operate apart from society, and external stakeholders need to be welcomed into the institution as part of the teams making decisions around operational and academic issues.

### Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think disciplinary silos persist in HE despite the general agreement that all relevant human problems require transversal solutions?
2. Given the increasing costs of HE and diminishing public and employer support, why do these institutions not move rapidly to change in fundamental ways?
3. What would your ideal HE institution be like organisationally?
4. What would your ideal HE institution be like as a socio-cultural environment for all the legitimate stakeholders?

### Notes

- 1 These basic references to Taylorism are ordered alphabetically. Despite differences over time, the basic critiques and analyses are similar, perhaps inevitably deepening over time on data and understanding of the larger consequences. Even so, the analysis from 1996 is as relevant today as it was then; the problems have only intensified. (See Bousquet, 2008; Davis, 2017; Deresiewicz, 2014; Ginsberg, 2011; Hall & Tandon, 2021; Kirn, 2009; Kirp, 2003; Levin & Greenwood, 2016; Lucas, 1996; Marginson & Considine, 2000; McGettigan, 2013; McMahon, 2009; Newfield, 2016; Readings, 1996; Robinson, 2022; Roij, 2022; Schrecker, 2010; Shumar, 1997; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Strathern, 2000; Tuchman, 2009; Washburn, 2005; Wellmon, 2015; Whelan, 2013; Wright & Shore, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015.)

- 2 See <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/25/companies-eliminate-college-degree-requirement-to-draw-needed-workers.html>; <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/Pages/Eliminating-Degree-Requirements-Hiring-IBM-Penguin.aspx>; <https://blog.ongig.com/job-descriptions/no-degree-requirements/>
- 3 See <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23550366/ron-desantis-first-amendment-free-speech-woke-academic-freedom-new-college-florida>
- 4 See <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/>
- 5 See <https://academicinfluence.com/inflection/college-life/overcoming-administrative-bloat>
- 6 See <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/10112018%20Data%20Snapshot%20Tenure.pdf>
- 7 See <https://www.sabanciuniv.edu/tr/hakkimizda>
- 8 See <https://myweb.sabanciuniv.edu/baburoglu/>
- 9 See <https://actionresearchplus.com/next-generation-universities-oguz-baburoglu-ph-d/>

## Recommended reading

- Levin, M., & Greenwood, D. (2016). *Creating a new public university and reviving democracy: Action research in higher education*. Berghahn Books.
- Newfield, C. (2016). *The great mistake: How we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wright, S., & Shore, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Death of the public university? Uncertain futures for higher education in the knowledge economy*. Berghahn Books.

## References

- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1996). *Organizational learning II: Theory, method, and practice* (Updated ed.). Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Behn, R. (2001). *Rethinking democratic accountability*. The Brookings Institution Press.
- Bousquet, M. (2008). *How the university works: Higher education and the low-wage nation*. NYU Press.
- Davis, G. (2017). *The Australian idea of a university*. Melbourne University Press.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2014). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. Free Press.

- Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., & Trow, M. (1994). *The new production of knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*. Sage.
- Ginsberg, B. (2011). *The fall of the faculty: The rise of the all-administrative university and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.
- Gustavsen, B., & Hunnius, G. (1981). *New patterns of work reform*. Universitetsforlaget. <https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/829315>
- Hall, B., & Tandon, R. (Eds.). (2021). *Socially responsible higher education: International perspectives on knowledge democracy*. Brill.
- Kerka, S. (1995). The Learning Organization: Myths and Reality. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Learning-Organization.-Myths-and-Realities.-Kerka/7120e2615e5aa4dbfa92548aa27505351bb2b21a>
- Kirn, W. (2009). *Lost in the meritocracy: The undereducation of an overachiever*. Doubleday.
- Kirp, D. (2003). *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the bottom line: The marketing of higher education*. Harvard University Press.
- Kleiner, A. (2008). *The age of heretics: A history of the radical thinkers who reinvented corporate management* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Levin, M., & Greenwood, D. (2016). *Creating a new public university and reviving democracy: Action research in higher education*. Berghahn.
- Lucas, C. (1996). *Crisis in the academy: Rethinking higher education in America*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marginson, S., & Considine, M. (2000). *The enterprise university: Power, governance and reinvention in Australia*. Cambridge University Press.
- McGettigan, A. (2013). *The great university gamble: Money, markets and the future of higher education*. Pluto Press.
- McMahon, W. (2009). *Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Newfield, C. (2016). *The great mistake: How we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nowotny, H., Scott, P., & Gibbons, M. (2001). *Re-thinking science: Knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty*. Polity Press.
- Ravn, J., Imaz Alias, O., Haga, T., & Greenwood, D. (2023). Industrial democracy (special issue). *International Journal of Action Research*, 19(1).
- Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Harvard University Press.
- Robinson, K. (2022). *Imagine if ...: Creating a future for us all*. Penguin.
- Roi, A. B. (Ed.). (2022). *Transformative research and higher education*. Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781801176941>
- Schrecker, E. (2010). *The lost soul of higher education: Corporatization, the assault on academic freedom, and the end of the American university*. New Press.
- Shumar, W. (1997). *College for sale: A critique of the commodification of higher education*. Falmer Press.

- Slaughter, S., & Leslie, L. L. (1997). *Academic capitalism: Politics, policies, and the entrepreneurial university*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Strathern, M. (2000). *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics, and the academy*. Routledge.
- Taylor, F. W. (1911). *The principles of scientific management*. Harper & Brothers.
- Taylorism. (n.d.). Oxford Reference. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803102744611>
- Trahair, R. C. S. (2015). *Behavior, technology, and organizational development: Eric Trist and the Tavistock Institute*. Transaction Publishers.
- Trist, E. L. (1981). *The evolution of socio-technical systems: A conceptual framework and an action research program*. Ontario Ministry of Labour, Ontario Quality of Working Life Centre.
- Tuchman, G. (2009). *Wannabe U: Inside the corporate university*. University of Chicago Press.
- Washburn, J. (2005). *University, Inc.: The corporate corruption of American higher education*. Basic Books.
- Wellmon, C. (2015). *Organizing enlightenment: Information overload and the invention of the modern research university*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Whelan, A. (2013). *Zombies in the academy: Living death in higher education*. Intellect. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cornell-trial/detail.action?docID=1334343>
- Whyte, W. F. (1991). *Social theory for action: How individuals and organizations learn to change* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Wright, S., & Greenwood, D. (2017). Recreating universities for the public good (special issue). *Learning and Teaching*, 10(1). <https://www.berghahnjournals-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/journals/latiss/10/1/latiss.10.issue-1.xml>
- Wright, S., & Shore, C. (2017). *Death of the public university? Uncertain futures for higher education in the knowledge economy*. Berghahn Books. <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/WrightDeath>
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., Wood, L., & Louw, I. (2015). *A participatory paradigm for an engaged scholarship in higher education: Action leadership from a South African perspective*. Sense.