

Deinstitutionalisation and Renewal in Higher Education

Tristan McCowan¹

¹University College London (UCL), London – United Kingdom

ABSTRACT – Deinstitutionalisation and Renewal in Higher Education. Despite some superficial heterogeneity, higher education institutions around the world share core structures. According to critics such as Ivan Illich, the ossification of these institutional forms has ended up impoverishing the practices they were originally intended to support. This article assesses the grounds for these claims and associated construction of alternatives. It identifies three significant features of the institution: *gates* – the controls on admissions to the university; *roles* – the distinctions drawn between students, lecturers and other actors; and *badges* – the processes and artefacts of validation of student learning and scholarship. These three features are seen to have varying forms, levels of rigidity and loci of control, and have ambiguous impacts on equality and fairness, and on the core purpose of the university to promote human understanding. Implications are drawn out for the future of the university, and for current initiatives that are attempting to subvert these structures and create alternative models.

Keywords: **Higher Education. Deschooling. University Reform.**

RESUMO – Desinstitucionalização e Renovação no Ensino Superior. Apesar de alguma heterogeneidade superficial, as instituições de ensino superior do mundo inteiro compartilham algumas estruturas centrais. De acordo com críticos como Ivan Illich, a ossificação destas formas institucionais terminou empobrecendo as práticas que originalmente pretendiam apoiar. Este artigo avalia as bases para essas afirmativas e a construção associada de alternativas. Identifica três aspectos significativos da instituição: *portas de entrada* – os controles sobre as admissões à universidade; *funções* – as diferenciações entre estudantes, docentes e outros atores; e *carimbos* – os processos e os artefatos de validação da aprendizagem e do conhecimento adquirido pelo estudante. Estes três aspectos se apresentam em diferentes formas, níveis de rigidez e pontos de controle, tendo impactos dúbios sobre a igualdade e a justiça social e sobre o propósito central da universidade de promover a compreensão humana. São apresentadas implicações para o futuro da universidade e para as atuais iniciativas que estão tentando subverter estas estruturas e criar modelos alternativos.

Palavras-chave: **Ensino Superior. Desescolarização. Reforma da Universidade.**

Introduction

Higher education globally has been the focus of a range of reform efforts in recent years. These attempts have targeted not only the systemic level (marketisation, student loans, entry of new providers), but also the institution itself, its governance, educational model and practices. Common reforms have included promotion of generic employability skills and entrepreneurship; introduction of distance and blended learning; use of technology in face-to-face provision; widening participation and affirmative action; changes to departmental structures and the creation of interdisciplinary units; and moves towards environmental sustainability (Crow; Dabars, 2015; Laurillard; Kennedy, 2017; Mason et al., 2006; McCowan; Leal Filho; Brandli, 2021; Norões; Costa, 2012; Williamson, 2018).

These changes have been more noteworthy in some contexts than others, with neoliberal reforms, for example, bringing significant shifts in the orientation and functioning of the university in Anglophone countries. Nevertheless, even in these cases the institution is still recognisable from its earlier manifestations, and identifiable with its counterparts stretching back to the mediaeval period, not only in name but also in its core characteristics. The university has been remarkably resilient in terms of its structures, practices and rituals, and few of the reforms mentioned above have troubled these underlying patterns. Furthermore, while there are evident national and regional characteristics in terms of higher education policy, and some commentators identify distinct models – e.g. the Latin American (Bernasconi, 2007), the Confucian (Marginson, 2014) or the Nordic (Välímää, 2018) – there is a remarkable level of homogeneity in higher education globally. Of the various distinct traditions of higher learning in ancient times, only the Islamic institutions have continued in unbroken fashion to the present day, and most institutions globally are adaptations of the European model.

The reasons for the dominance of a particular institutional form in higher education are numerous and complex, and involve historical questions of geopolitics, colonisation and soft power, and continuing processes of globalisation, dependency, expansion of markets, and developments in transport, and in information and communications technology. Yet there is a distinct set of questions about the relevance of this homogeneity and continuity to the functioning and impact of the university. Is the maintenance of traditional structures such as admissions procedures, year groupings, disciplinary divisions, professor-student hierarchies and awarding of degrees necessary or even essential to the achievement of its aims, or are they alternatively shackles that hold it back?

This article explores these questions of the nature of the underpinning institutional structures of the university, and their moral, political and educational significance. Identifying the structures in the first place is not an entirely straightforward task, given the deep rooting

that has made them almost invisible for those people brought up within the system. Making the familiar unfamiliar is the first task then. The second is to determine their role and impact in relation to the purposes of the university. Neither maintaining the traditional institutional structures of the university simply because they are traditional, nor rejecting them for the same reason, are coherent positions, and we need an assessment of the role they play – in theory and practice. Finally, and as an extension of the second, the article explores what happens when the structures are removed, drawing on a few illustrative examples of deschooling initiatives in practice.

In determining the viability and desirability of this process of deinstitutionalisation, the question is inevitably raised of what yardstick we are using to judge the university. Definitions of the institution are notoriously hard to provide. This article will rest on an assumption of the central purpose of the university being, in Collini's (2012, p. 92) words, "extending human understanding through open-ended enquiry", with the organisation and activities of the institution cohering around that end. We could add to this definition that university is distinguished from other educational forms in providing in-depth and sustained study in particular areas of knowledge, rather than basic, generic or short-term instruction.

A previous analysis of the role of higher education in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (McCowan, 2019) explored the idea of the 'post-development university', one that might open up new possibilities beyond the current development compact, with its good intentions but problematic trappings of modernity, capitalism and coloniality. The post-development university was seen to have two elements: ecology of knowledges and deinstitutionalisation¹. The former of these has had much more attention in the literature and in social and political movements. It has manifested itself particularly through the calls for decolonisation of the curriculum, which have a long history in Latin America, but have come to the fore in recent years through the Rhodes Must Fall protests in South Africa. The relevance of decolonisation is most obvious in recently colonised countries which – despite formal independence and the emergence of an autonomous higher education system – nevertheless maintain the former colonial influence in their curriculum content, selection of courses, reading lists, epistemic foundations and sometimes staff bodies (Del Monte; Posholi, 2021; Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). Nevertheless, these movements have also spread to the higher education systems of the former colonial powers themselves, seeking to diversify the curriculum in the context of multi-ethnic populations and diverse international student bodies.

These writings and movements focus primarily on critique, on what needs to be removed from the university (the tearing down of the statue). In terms of what might replace it, there are calls for indigenisation of the curriculum – in increasing levels of profundity from facts and subject matter, to theory and worldview – or to a pluralism, ecology or diversity of different forms of knowledge. The idea of epistemic plu-

ralism and epistemologies of the South has had more attention in recent years (Arora; Stirling, 2020; Connell, 2014; Cortina; Earl 2020; Takayama; Sriprakash; Connell, 2015; Santos, 2015; Unesco, 2021), though most often traced in very general terms. There have also been some examples in practice, such as the Intercultural Universities in Mexico, intended to provide a space for higher learning in indigenous knowledge traditions and languages, in dialogue with mainstream academic knowledge, leading to formally recognised degrees on a par with other institutions (Dietz, 2009; Perales Franco; McCowan, 2021; Schmelkes, 2009).

However, the second aspect – deinstitutionalisation – has had much less attention, both in the literature and in practice. Much of the writing and mobilising around decolonisation assumes that the structures of the university, the national higher education system and global knowledge system, will remain largely intact, although with different knowledge content and different voices, and a redistribution of opportunities for speaking and listening within those systems. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, one of the most prolific writers on this topic, does acknowledge the need to challenge institutional forms in implanting the ecology of knowledges:

By a polyphonic university, I mean a university that exercises its commitment in a pluralistic way, not just in terms of substantive contents but also in institutional and organizational terms. A polyphonic university is a university whose committed voice is not only composed of many voices but, above all, is composed of voices that are expressed in both conventional and nonconventional ways, both in diploma-oriented and non-diploma-oriented learning processes (Santos, 2018, p. 277).

Santos (2017; 2018) puts forward the notions of the *pluriversity* and *subversity*: the former referring to the transformation *within* the system, and the latter *outside* it. The pluriversity is characterised by two elements: commitment to social justice, and an ecology of knowledges, being plural rather than unitary (as the *university* is) in terms of its epistemic basis, curriculum and constituencies. An example we might give of this kind of institution is the University of Lusophone African-Brazilian Integration (UNILAB²) in the north-east of Brazil, which was founded in 2010 to provide a centre for South-South cooperation between Brazil and Portuguese-speaking African countries, as well as a focal point for teaching and research relating to African cultures within Brazil. While having distinctive elements, UNILAB is a federal university, and adheres to the standard structures of admissions, staffing, curriculum and qualifications of the federal system. As with many of these innovations, UNILAB has not been able to achieve all of the envisaged goals, in part due to the change of government in Brazil from 2016, and active hostility from the state, on which it depends for funding and regulation.

The subversity, on the other hand, operates outside of the higher education system, usually without formal recognition and funding streams, presenting practices of teaching and research that are often

unrecognisable to the mainstream. In Santos's (2018, p. 277) view, the term subversity: "captures both the subaltern character of social groups often involved in its initiatives and the subversive manner in which it intervenes in the conventional idea of the university". While examples in practice of the subversity are not prominent, particularly due to the generally small size and transience of such initiatives, there have been a number of such experiences in all world regions, many of them members of the Ecoversities Alliance. These include Unitierra in Mexico and Swaraj in India, which will be outlined in greater detail below, initiatives that provide a conscious challenge to our notion of university, through doing away with admission requirements, certification, distinctions between lecturers and students, and programmes of study.

These ideas are important in drawing our attention to the need both to contest and transform existing mainstream institutions, and to allow space for the creation of new forms of institution. However, further analysis is needed of the structures of the university that are to be subverted. This article takes on this task, providing a theoretical mapping of the salient institutional characteristics, and draws out the implications of abandoning or replacing them.

Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation

Institutions have been defined as:

[...] a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment (Turner, 1997, p. 6).

Institutions can take one of two broad forms: formal organisations or social norms. So we can describe the Catholic Church, or parliament or prisons as institutions, but also marriage, the family or patriarchy. In this study the term will be used primarily in the sense of a formal organisation, though having its basis in an underpinning set of ideas and practices as much as a specific organisational template.

There is an extensive literature on the role of institutions in society, in a variety of different disciplines including sociology, economics and anthropology (Acemoglu et al., 2005; DiMaggio; Powell, 1983; North, 1990; Scott, 2013). In the field of education, neo-institutionalism has been a major current in sociology of education and comparative education, particularly associated with Stanford University (Baker; Le-Tendre, 2005; Benavot; Riddle, 1988; Chabbott, 2002; Meyer et al., 1977). A key focus of this research has been the expansion of mass education around the world, as well as convergence between different national systems, and adoption of similar policies and curricula, associated with world culture theory (Meyer; Rowan, 2006; Anderson Levitt, 2003). De-

bates have been vigorous over recent decades as to whether or not there is uniformity or diversity, convergence or divergence of schools and education systems around the world (Silova; Rapple, 2015).

In higher education studies, institutional theory has been used to understand isomorphic tendencies and ‘academic drift’ amongst universities, as institutions become more similar to their more prestigious counterparts, developing postgraduate degrees and research programmes, in their search for legitimacy and public recognition (Morphew; Huisman, 2002). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that this homogeneity is brought about by three forces: *coercive* (pressure brought by other organisations on which the institution is dependent, in particular government), *mimetic* (emulation of more prestigious organisations) and *normative* (through professional networks and communication). In some cases government regulation aims to put a brake on these processes of isomorphism, while at other times they drive it – for example, the UK’s dissolving the distinction between universities and polytechnics in 1992.

In contemporary times, internationalisation and rankings are central to the quest for legitimacy, as institutions seek recognition through membership of organisations, partnerships and high placing in national, regional or international league tables. Nevertheless, not all scholars concur that the quest for legitimacy amongst universities is leading to full homogenisation: Stensaker et al. (2019), for example, through their study of institutions’ strategic plans, argue that we are moving instead towards stratification, as different echelons of the systems aspire to different levels, with some building recognition through local impact rather than being ‘world-class’. Zapp, Jungblut and Ramirez (2020) show that while membership of organisations such as the International Association of Universities may confer legitimacy on some types of university, the top-ranked institutions have little need and can rely on their ranking position and smaller, exclusive membership groups.

The literature on institutional theory in higher education aids in explaining why it is so difficult for institutions to escape from the conventional mould. As outlined above, educational institutions can be seen as ‘institutional organisations’ rather than ‘technical organisations’ (Meyer; Rowan, 2006). Unlike the latter, which operate on an efficiency basis, using well-defined technologies to produce easily measured outcomes, the former “use ambiguous technologies (e.g. teaching) to produce outputs (e.g. knowledge, very capable students) whose ‘value’ and ‘quality’ are very difficult to determine” (Morphew; Huisman, 2002, p. 495). According to the authors, this leads to “[...] acquisition of normatively defined practices and structures”, since “a college is a college only when those inside and outside the organization view it as a legitimate version of such” (p. 496). These considerations aid in our understanding of how difficult it is to create alternative universities, or to make more than superficial reforms to the institution.

While mindful of this literature, this article addresses a rather different set of questions about institutionalisation. Instead of the empirical question of how institutions emerge, develop and cease to exist, why they appear in certain contexts and not in others, or manifest themselves in different ways, it is concerned with the normative question of whether we should actively seek to dismantle and reconstruct the institution of university. Naturally, this task involves an analysis of the way the institution of university currently is – one that will be outlined in the section that follows, though focusing on key elements of their structure without an extensive historical or comparative analysis of their appearance in specific contexts.

The hypothesis put forward for exploration in this article is that presented by Ivan Illich (1971; 1973; 1975) in his analyses of various institutions of modernity: that institutionalisation is a well-motivated and perhaps inevitable part of the way in which societies develop, in order to protect and promote cherished practices in society – whether health, education, religious worship, relationships or child-rearing. Yet the structures that develop to provide and protect, to resource and regulate, with time outgrow their necessary size and reach, become ossified and take on an importance in their own right, rather than serving the original good in question. At this stage, institutions start to undermine and even to destroy that good – the principle of counter-productivity (Smith, 2011, p. 5).

Rich and poor alike depend on schools and hospitals which guide their lives, form their world view, and define for them what is legitimate and what is not. Both view doctoring oneself as irresponsible, learning on one's own as unreliable, and community organization, when not paid for by those in authority, as a form of aggression or subversion. For both groups the reliance on institutional treatment renders independent accomplishment suspect.

So for Illich there is a disempowering function of institutions, in providing the illusion of the accomplishment through treatment, and simultaneously undermining people's abilities to learn by themselves and from each other in daily life. The aim instead is for what he terms 'convivial' learning, free from dehumanising technologies and control, or "[...] educational *webs* which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring" (Illich, 1971, p. 2).

Illich's critique of education has various dimensions (Smith 2011). Some of these are fairly standard in critical commentaries on education, such as the rejection of commodification. There is also the hidden curriculum, the pernicious messages transmitted by the cultures of schooling that imbue and impoverish our subsequent lives: for Illich, notable amongst these are induction into consumerism, creating dependence on institutions and naturalising inequalities. Next is the overemphasis on qualifications, the prioritising by teachers, students

and all other stakeholders of the formal assessments of learning rather than the learning itself – discussed elsewhere as the *diploma disease* (Dore, 1976). But there are two other points that are more distinctive to Illich. While critiques and re-formulations of the role of the teacher are commonplace, Illich goes further to assert that the very existence of professional teachers is a problem. In order for learning to take place in all spaces of our lives, he argues that we need to move away from the idea that the role of teaching is confined to a few specialists. Instead, all people are teachers and all are learners. Finally, there is the analysis of the education system as a cycle of self-perpetuation. Despite the obvious drawbacks of our current education system in light of the above elements, it continuously reproduces itself into the future as its claws are dug too deep in our societies. Since livelihoods and even survival depend to a large extent on formal educational qualifications in most countries, opting out is simply not an option for most people.

Illich's ideas around deschooling were developed together with his colleague at the Centre for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Mexico, Everett Reimer, who published his own version in *School is Dead* (Reimer, 1971), and taken forward by a number of contemporary thinkers and activists such as Gustavo Esteva, Manish Jain and Madhu Suri Prakash. Ironically, the most prominent actualisation of the ideas of deschooling have been from those opposed to Illich's political views, from free-market libertarians rather than anarcho-communists. There have been increasing examples of what has been called 'Silicon Valley deschooling' (McCowan, 2016) and 'deschooling from above' (Sukarieh; Tannock, 2020), critiquing formal education for its inadequacy in forming entrepreneurs and forging opportunities in the capitalist market. Initiatives such as Uncollege and the Thiel Fellowships are in this vein.

Illich's broader critique of institutions is not without controversy and contestation. The questions of whether organised religion promotes spirituality or alternatively stifles it, the effects of our policing and criminal justice systems on law and order, and contemporary medical practices on our health and well-being are unresolved questions, are highly politicised and are not amenable to simple empirical tests. Likewise, questions of deschooling are unsettling and emotive, and have more detractors than proponents. While acknowledging the complexities and risks of deschooling, this article takes as its starting point that radical (in the sense of going to the roots) reassessment of educational institutions is valuable and indeed essential, and that we should not take any aspect of traditional structures for granted.

The paragraph above has made assumptions about shared institutions and shared experiences that may be unwarranted. Institutions differ depending on the context, and function differently in relation to diverse populations within a given context. So, the justice system may simultaneously be highly effective for the privileged few and be pernicious to marginalised groups. The analysis in this article of the implications of educational institutions must in this way differentiate between groups in society – and the stratification of outcomes is impossible to

ignore in education. Nevertheless, this article does not restrict itself to an analysis of inequalities within and through education, and remains open to the possibility raised by Illich of negative impacts of institutional education on all learners.

While Illich explores in depth some aspects of schooling – the role of the teacher and the hidden curriculum – there are further important aspects of the structure of the institution that are not dealt with directly and require analysis. This article provides this assessment through the three facets of *gates*, *roles* and *badges*, as outlined further below. The analysis draws on Illich's key insights, and while not adhering to every aspect of his argument or endorsing all of the empirical claims in *Deschooling Society*, supports the central tenet that humanity's dependence on institutions needs questioning and that we need to move from dehumanising to convivial technology and relationships. Nevertheless, universities can be seen as having some distinctive characteristics in relation to the schools which are focus of Illich's analysis. Universities have a multiplicity of functions beyond education, most importantly research, which may manifest elements of institutionalisation, but in different ways. Another important difference is the far greater autonomy of universities. Much of Illich's critique relates to technocratic control and in universities there is a higher proportion of control by the practitioners (the academic community) – though admittedly lessened in the neoliberal age.

Gates, roles and badges

The analysis presented in this article focuses on three characteristics: gates, roles and badges. *Gates* refer to the mechanisms of the university that determine what comes in, and to a lesser extent what goes out, guarded by gatekeepers. Most obvious of these is the process of selecting which students to admit. *Roles* refer to the parts that different actors in the university play, the distinction between teachers and students, between academic and non-academic staff, and hierarchies in all categories. Finally, *badges* refer to the validation that is provided to the outputs of the university: in particular, the learning of students graduating and the quality of academic publications.

While not representing a comprehensive picture of the university (and a number of aspects of governance, learning and societal engagement would require separate treatment), these three elements constitute crucial features, and are prominent targets for deinstitutionalisation. As will be seen from the analysis below, these three have important implications in practice relating both to the core purpose of the university in promoting human understanding, and to social justice. They work directly as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of people, and in facilitating and constraining what is possible in terms of practice. But they also act indirectly to shape understandings of the processes of learning and scholarship, in a way akin to the 'hidden curriculum'.

Gates

Universities are necessarily involved in interchange with the broader society. In a previous study (McCowan, 2019), this flow was captured by the notion of *interaction*, as one of the triad of characteristics of the university, along with value and function. Interaction with society occurs through a semipermeable membrane, involving inward and outward movement of actors and ideas. Universities vary in the ease with which this inward and outward movement occurs. So, Ivy League universities have highly restricted inward movement of actors, while open distance providers have ease of inward movement; developmental universities or civic universities, which play an active role in local development, will have more outward movement of ideas than traditional universities focused on basic research.

This interaction is mediated by gates. The gates determine what comes in and goes out of the institution, and thereby to a large extent control the nature and perception of the university. Gates are operated by gatekeepers, either in the form of human actors with discretionary judgements, or procedures or algorithms formulated in texts and programs. Gatekeepers may operate in an idiosyncratic or personally motivated way, but to a large extent they reflect the mission and sense of self of the institution as a whole. The dominant drivers for gatekeeping in academia are quality and status.

Student admissions represent the most obvious form of gate in higher education. Higher education systems have rarely operated on a universalist basis, admitting the whole of the age cohort, and in cases in which this is approximated, specific institutions – especially more prestigious ones – still make a careful selection of students. There is a wide variety of practice in relation to admissions criteria – usually involving performance on academic tests, whether secondary school leaving assessments or specific university exams, but sometimes broader life experience or performance in interview – adopted in order to select the ‘best’ students for the institution. While many countries have adopted affirmative action policies to guard against discrimination against particular groups in society, or to actively promote their access, for the most part the gates serve to keep out those with lower academic scores, determined in large part by the quality of previous schooling, and thereby linked to socio-economic background.

Access gates can be justified in different ways. They might be based on a minimum criterion of quality. So, for students it might be considered that a minimum level of academic ability or prior performance is necessary for pursuing studies at the university. Yet often it is argued that this kind of gate is necessary for upholding the academic integrity of the institution, and that opening the door wider will lead to a loss of standards (in fact, this argument has been mobilised to great effect in retaining the elite nature of higher education over past centuries). It is not possible here to address in full the complex question of who should and should not go to university. But suffice it to say that

restricting university access to the few has no justification in itself. The only fair and coherent limitation on access might be that students will benefit more from university study when they have reached a minimum level of preparation (McCowan, 2007). But if that groundwork can be provided within the institution (as it is in some affirmative action and widening participation strategies), then not even this bar is necessary.

There are other forms of gate and gatekeeping in operation in universities. Staff recruitment policies also act as a filter allowing certain kinds of individuals in and keeping others out. In recent decades, the PhD has emerged as the basic criterion for an academic post, supplemented by various other factors including publications and research grants, performance in interview, connections and in some cases 'lineage' (e.g. the candidate's PhD supervisor). Gates can operate not only in terms of entry and exit of actors, but also of forms of relationship with external bodies. For elite universities, institutional partnerships are an important area, and the branding and prestige interests of the institution will mean that only some partners are considered appropriate. Gatekeeping can also operate in terms of inward and outward movement of ideas, with some institutions curating carefully the outputs and messages emanating from the university.

The obvious impact of gates is in their rationing of opportunity, and their role in reproduction of socio-economic inequalities. While universities may not intentionally apply criteria that discriminate against lower-income communities, or those of marginalised language, racial, ethnic, gender or social class groups, they do so in most cases. Gates can also lead to homogeneity of actors, if the same criteria are always applied, and can act against the positive benefits of diversity.

Roles

The second key mechanism is the definition of roles. The idea here is that individuals passing through the gate of the university adopt specific roles which confer particular privileges and responsibilities, and restrict others. The most obvious of these is the differentiation between those who teach and those who learn. While the distinction between teaching and learning may be near universal, the professionalisation and fossilisation of these roles is not: in some cultural and institutional contexts people may shift between these roles at different points in time, and depending on the form of activity. As discussed above, Illich critiqued the notion of teacher as expert, not because there is anything wrong with teaching, but because it is problematic when an individual is permanently professionalised as a teacher, thereby removing the teaching function from others.

In universities, the roles are fairly clear-cut: professors/lecturers on the one hand and students on the other, with different positions in the classroom, different times to speak and listen, different levels of control over the curriculum and forms of teaching, different leisure spaces, and different financial relationships with the institution (one

receiving and one paying or being paid for). Crucially, lecturers decide on the programme of study, with students having only limited discretion over what they learn: while in most systems they will have chosen their degree course, and in some their combination of modules, it is rare that they will have determined the content, sequencing or forms of assessment.

There are also more subtle forms of distinction within these broad categories: so there are different levels of students, from undergraduate, to masters level and PhD – with doctoral researchers in some institutions having a liminal role between students and staff; between different grades of lecturer/professor and temporary staff; and between academic and non-academic staff. Thus far we have only spoken of distinctions of role, but these are inevitably accompanied by hierarchies – of prestige and power. Most obviously these positions are held by the senior office holders of the university – the Vice Chancellor, pro-Vice Chancellor, deans of faculty and so forth – though both prestige and power in universities may be held by those who are not in management roles.

Within the notion of roles, we can also include disciplinary affiliations, as analysed in the work on academic tribes and territories (Becher; Trowler, 2001). In addition to being professors or lecturers, academic staff are also art historians, physicists etc. and their activities and relationships depend heavily on these disciplinary identities. These divisions raise broader questions of the nature and structure of knowledge, ones that cannot be covered in full in this article. In relation to the grand challenges facing humanity in the 21st century, and those of sustainable development and climate change specifically, many have argued that disciplinary specialisation – while having borne extraordinary fruits – are part of the problem, and that we need to move towards interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work (Unesco, 2021).

The role assigned to the lecturer also involves being the judge of what students should learn, and the curator of the programme of study. The structuring of the curriculum has been studied extensively in the sociology of education: for example, Bernstein (1973) described in terms of *classification* the ways in which knowledge is divided into different areas, and the strength of the boundaries between them, and *framing* the control over what is within that area, the presentation of that knowledge in the pedagogical act. The curriculum can tend towards a collection code (with a closed relationship between areas of knowledge) or an integrated code (with an open relationship), and pedagogies can be more or less visible (strong framing) or invisible (weak framing). These ideas are important in highlighting that differentiation of roles and control of educational processes can take place in subtle ways, even in progressive pedagogies in which to the external eye the lecturer is taking more of a backseat, facilitator role, and the students are more active and empowered in the classroom context. There is also the question – raised by Bernstein (1974) in relation to visible and invisible pedagogies, and the relative advantage of the middle classes in navigating

educational spaces without strong classification and framing – that the openness of deschooled learning spaces may make learning harder for disadvantaged students.

The implications of the role of the lecturer as curator of knowledge are therefore complex. When students in the city of Bologna in the 11th century formed an association for contracting teachers, and in the process created the first European university, they had clear reasons for doing so. There were areas of knowledge in which they wanted to be proficient (law, theology), they saw teachers as the most appropriate way of acquiring the information, and that through them they would be able to acquire the validation of the knowledge (badges). These are all reasonable motivations, and they have underpinned the emergence of the professional teacher in almost all contexts of the world at all levels of the education system.

Nevertheless, there is another side to the story. As Illich pointed out, while we may seek to learn from those more experienced or knowledgeable than us, those people do not need to be professional teachers, and we may alternately take on the role of teacher and learner at different times, depending on the context and field of knowledge. The existence of teachers as experts can be disempowering, and encourage people away from learning from non-professional teachers, from other students and by oneself.

In relation to the university specifically, autonomous learning is commonly practised, and dependence on teachers is much less than at lower levels of the education system. Nevertheless, the primary focus is still on the classroom, the formal curriculum and the lecturer, and can lead to an unfortunate neglect of other learning spaces within the university. In fact, much significant learning – of an academic and non-academic kind – takes place in other spaces, in the library, in the café, walking to the bus stop, not to mention in campus activities and student societies, and experiential learning beyond the university. The focus on the lecturer can also lead to a devaluing of peer-to-peer learning among students.

It is true that the university is relatively fluid about roles compared to other educational institutions. Uniforms are not common, other than occasional wearing of emblems on clothing, asserting pride in one's affiliation or sporting prowess. While there is significant variation between cultural contexts, there is less differentiation and formality in the relations between students and staff than in schools – aided by the fact that all are adults. Between staff members, while there are substantial hierarchies of prestige, levels of control are lower than in many forms of organisation, and there is a substantial degree of autonomy of work. Nevertheless, despite these relative fluidities, the institution is still characterised by differentiation: a complex array of designations and roles that separate people out and mark how they are supposed to act and be treated. Experiences of deschooling, on the other hand, tend to be characterised by a relaxing of this differentiation and more fluid roles.

Badges

The third of these elements is that of validation. One of the primary powers of the university is to confer on individuals a stamp of legitimacy, of their knowledge, understanding and practice in a particular field of study, and very often of a licence to exercise a profession. These badges have become crucial to the functioning of society, in their use as proxies by employers in their recruitment practices, either denoting abilities in a particular area of work, or generic attributes of knowledge, skill and application. In some cases professional bodies exercise their own control over entry into a profession, but very often this task is handed over entirely to the higher education system. Validation of learning, and particularly professional learning, has made higher education almost a necessity for those privileged enough to have access to it, and undoubtedly has been the major cause of the astounding rate of expansion in the past half century (Marginson, 2016).

The second major area of validation is collective knowledge in the form of academic outputs. While in many countries academic publishing houses are independent of universities, through the peer review process it is primarily university staff who confer the badge of legitimacy on published research. While there are many forms of academic publication, and in fields of arts and humanities books are central, it is the journal article that represents the gold standard. Through the review processes of journals, universities determine what research and scholarship has the necessary rigour, originality and significance to take its place in the literature of the field.

Badges are a good illustration of the problems of institutionalisation broadly speaking. They start as well intentioned mechanism for certifying knowledge: assessment during the learning experience can serve a formative purpose in orienting teaching, and at the end of the experience to provide confirmation of the student's level of competence and successful completion of the course. The importance of the final certification in terms of future opportunities of students, however, means that it is the assessment and not the learning process that ultimately becomes the key focal point. This re-emphasis of attention leads to what has been called 'the tail wagging the dog', or the 'backwash effect', where instead of assessments following learning, they end up determining the learning process. These dynamics are seen at all levels of the education system. This tendency can end up corrupting the mission of the entire education system, as analysed by Dore (1976) in his work on the *diploma disease* in a number of countries.

Badges relating to validation of academic knowledge can also show signs of the tail wagging the dog. Instead of academics pursuing understanding and then publishing for the benefit of others, the goal ends up being the outputs themselves, with research being oriented to maximise their quantity and prestige. These trends are associated with broader ideas of performativity in the context of neoliberalism (Ball, 2012) and in higher education, increasing use of evaluation systems

for researchers and metrics associated with journal citations. Furthermore, there is a homogenising dimension to the evaluation of outputs in that most of the high prestige journals listed in the Web of Science are English-language and located in high-income countries.

Discussions of academic publishing, therefore, show the close links between deinstitutionalisation and decolonisation: the system of badges (in this case the global academic publishing industry) acts to reinforce Global North hegemonic control through the (often tacit) codes and criteria of article acceptance, making it harder for other voices and alternative epistemologies to receive exposure. Moving towards an ecology of knowledges and epistemic pluralism (Santos, 2015; Arora; Stirling, 2020) therefore requires us to analyse the institutional and inter-institutional structures of validation.

This point leads us to another fundamental critique of mainstream academic knowledge in its individualisation. Higher education systems and academic communities feed off narcissism, with egos constantly puffed up or deflated through the recognition or rejection of the ideas they have put forward. Yet as argued by Ashwin (2016), individual ownership of ideas is somewhat illusory, and however much we imagine a contribution is original, it has inevitably been constructed through the collective efforts of the academic community and previous thinkers. This proprietariness can be seen as a barrier as great as commercial restrictions on intellectual property (Unesco, 2021). Individualisation of authorship may be illusory, as discussed above, but it may also be undesirable, with considerable benefits to be gained through open sourcing, as discussed extensively in relation to Linux software, for example. So while there are clear benefits to the peer review system, it can serve to reproduce a single story, a particular way of knowing, and marginalise others.

Building on processes of validation of learning and knowledge production, we can see institutions as a whole obtaining badges – through the recognition conferred by university rankings, most prominently the Shanghai, Times Higher Education and QS rankings at the international level, but also a series of national level rankings. In addition to diverting the missions and activities of universities towards elite research and publications, another impact of rankings (and indeed all forms of badges) is in fostering competition rather than collaboration – leading to what Naidoo (2018) calls a fetishisation of these competitive relations.

Thus far the analysis has treated these three elements separately, but there are clearly connections between them. Gates function in relation to specific roles – people are selected to fit the mould of undergraduate student, incoming lecturer and so forth. Gates also open or close in relation to badges: part of the role of selectivity in an institution is to restrict access to those people who are likely to achieve the badge, and to ensure the rewards are not distributed too widely and thereby lose their positional value. Movement between roles is also dependent

on the acquisition of badges. In summary, there are numerous ways in which the three interact to modify each other.

This section has identified some salient features of the institution of university, in the way it regulates its internal activity and relates to the external world. It has taken as its starting point that there is a high degree of homogeneity and shared fundamental assumptions about the institution. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that there is diversity between contexts (cultural, by resource level) and between institutional types (research intensive university, teaching only institution, open online university) in the way these three features manifest themselves. While they appear in all institutions, there is diversity in relation to three elements:

a. Form – the nature of the structure: e.g. which kinds of diplomas are emitted

b. Control – locus of decision-making: e.g. who sets the policy on admissions

c. Rigidity – the degree of fixedness or flexibility: e.g. how fluid are the roles within the university.

The impact in practice of institutional structures depends to a large extent on their form, control and rigidity. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, we can observe some general trends across higher education systems. What can be seen clearly is an illustration of Illich's thesis that institutional forms start off well-intentioned but have a tendency to overstay their welcome and become corrupted. Gates start as a way of ensuring appropriateness of students and viability of resources, but end up as a mechanism for exclusion and brand management. Roles enable the benefits of specialisation, but can stifle and disempower. Badges start off as a way of recognising what has been accomplished, but begin to dominate the process, determining (and impoverishing) what comes before. The section that follows provides vignettes of two initiatives that have attempted to subvert these structures to avoid these negative impacts and recuperate the spirit of the university.

Deinstitutionalising the University

Unitierra (or *Universidad de la Tierra*, University of the Land) was founded in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1999 and continues to have a presence there, as well as having branches in Chiapas, Puebla and California. It was created through the dissatisfaction of local indigenous and other community groups with conventional education and a desire to create bottom-up provision free from dependence on the state or market. It draws on traditional indigenous practices, with links to the Zapatistas, as well as the ideas of post-development thinker Gustavo Esteva, who was one of the founding members. The following statement summarises the founding mission:

Universidad de la Tierra, or Unitierra, was thus born amongst the context of radical reactions against school-

ing observed in many Indigenous communities. We call ourselves a University to claim back the old tradition of first universities: that of learning together with friends around a table for the sole pleasure of learning and for the passion that studying inspires. Our university is not for getting a diploma or climbing the educational pyramid. We welcome young people with and without diplomas; some of whom have formal degrees while others never went to school (Unitierra, n.d.).

The university works primarily through free association of learners in an apprenticeship model, as well as collective study groups, both general and around specific themes. It supports itself primarily through donations, and is governed through a participatory assembly.

Swaraj University shares a number of characteristics with Unitierra, and there are many points of contact in the ideas of its founder, Manish Jain, and those of Gustavo Esteva. It was established near Udaipur, northern India, in 2010 to provide alternative educational programmes for young people based on self-designed learning. Students – known as *Khojis*, those who seek – undertake a two-year programme constructing their own curricula in accordance with their own interests, embedded in a community of learning. Curricular areas include the following: design and architecture, food and farming, art and history, spirituality, healing and self-care, entrepreneurship, science and environment. Like Unitierra, Swaraj combines mentorship (in this case based on the Indian *guru-shishya tradition*) for both skills-based and wisdom development, along with collective, group-based learning. Its opposition to certification is explicit:

There is *NO degree or certificate* required to join Swaraj University, and we do not give any degrees after the course. We are proud of being totally unrecognized and un-deemed, since we believe in creating portfolios based on one's own experiences rather than degrees and certificates as a proof of one's education. We are also part of the campaign, *Healing Ourselves from the Diploma Disease*, a national campaign to say NO to degrees and certificate and promote a better evaluation framework such as that which is based on experience and portfolios (Swaraj University, n.d.).

Nevertheless, there is a nod to public recognition as the organisation has identified a range of employers who are willing to recognise the portfolios developed by learners.

These two initiatives have been selected as they are amongst the most profoundly radical of the alternative higher education experiences currently underway. They also share many features, and will be dealt with for the most part together in the analysis that follows. It is important to point out that this is not an analysis of their impact in practice (which would require detailed empirical research), but an assessment of the challenge to the theoretical model of the university.

It is clear that both of these initiatives present profound challenges to our conception of 'university', and to the three features outlined above. First, gates are significantly reduced and altered. There is no selection on the basis of academic merit, and no fees charged for admission. The only restrictions (in the case of Unitierra) are being an adult, and having a proposal for study and community engagement. There are of course a number of personal barriers that might stop individuals presenting themselves as students (lack of time, lack of confidence and so forth), but almost no institutional gatekeeping.

Roles are also fluid in this model. While there are people with an ongoing commitment to the institution who might correspond to staff members, and who ensure the continuity of the initiative, they are not professional teachers and also have the role of learners at times. Importantly, the roles as teacher and student are reversible. In one instance, a person may be mentoring another in documentary film-making, and be mentored by them in another instance in ancient Greek philosophy.

In the case of badges, there are perhaps the most radical changes. The institutions offer no certification for the learning gained – neither of the formal publicly recognised 'degree' type, nor of the micro-credential style becoming popular in online learning. This is a deliberate strategy to reclaim learning from the tyranny of qualifications. Because these institutions are not beholden to any external body or judgement, they are freed from having to orient their activities towards professional or other expectations, and allow space for organic learning.

It is important to emphasise, however, that it is impossible to do away entirely with these structures. They can be weakened, or made less significant, or reoriented, but they will still be there to some degree. An entirely structureless educational experience is impossible – not least because by definition education always has an element of intentionality. Learning can take place at any point in life, but it is only education when the learning experience is organised deliberately. Nevertheless, there are marked differences in the extent and impact of those structures, making it meaningful to talk about greater or lesser levels of institutionalisation.

Gates, roles and badges are, therefore, not completely eradicated in these initiatives but they are profoundly transformed. In relation to the three characteristics outlined above: their *form* is changed – in the case of Swaraj, the badges become a portfolio of substantive work, rather than a proxy certificate; the locus of *control* changes – its composition is determined by the individual learner in collaboration with peers; and the *rigidity* is lessened – with extensive flexibility in how the portfolio is constructed, and indeed no obligation to create one at all.

In assessing these innovations it is important to bear in mind that processes of deinstitutionalisation are dynamic. It is not a one-off task of removing or transforming structures, since the natural tendency is for structures to grow and ossify over time, and become as unwieldy as those they have replaced. Constant scrutiny is needed, therefore, of

whether the institutional apparatuses are supporting or squeezing out the core purposes.

The profound changes in these elements might make us question whether what we are dealing with in fact here is a university or an institution of higher education at all. Nevertheless, according to the criteria discussed earlier – the aim of promoting human understanding through open-ended enquiry, through in-depth rather than broad and general learning or scholarship – these initiatives are without doubt assuming the mantle. And, while further empirical study would be needed to fully understand the impact in practice, in many ways they are doing so in reinvigorated ways for segments of the population who are routinely excluded from conventional higher education institutions.

It is important not to confuse the specific orientation of these two institutions (and others like them) with the challenge they pose to the institution. It so happens that both of them are oriented towards social inclusivity, indigenous knowledge and environmental sustainability, thus many of their area activities revolve around these ends. But it would be possible to have a deschooled university that focused on scientific literacy, entrepreneurship, spiritual growth or political conscientisation. Would these be indistinguishable from a scholarly society, or a reading group, or a collection of friends and colleagues that support each other in their studies? Perhaps not, or it is these distinctions that we need to challenge.

Of course, with transformations as profound as these, there are potential losses as well as gains. As outlined in a previous study (McCowan, 2016), radical higher education suffers significantly from the lack of public recognition provided through qualifications, thereby struggling to garner resources as well as students. This point substantiates Illich's idea of the cycle of perpetuation: society is so imbued with the qualifications framework that stepping outside of it means risking almost everything, and most people are not willing to take that gamble. The situation will change when there is a critical mass of people opting out of conventional diplomas, but that time is some way off.

The opting out of badges may in fact impact the openness of the gates. In practice, given the necessity of formal qualifications for most rewarding and well-remunerated professional opportunities in society, most young people do not have (or do not feel they have) the option to attend an institution of this type. Those attending these institutions consequently end up being those who already have formal qualifications, those who have financial security and therefore do not need them, or those who have no possibilities of obtaining them. Until a major societal shift occurs, therefore, the risk of opting out of the conventional employment sector is simply too high for many people, particularly those who are not financially secure.

A diametrically opposed problem presented by the lack of gates is the potential of an influx of students. In part, gates are there to ensure that the intake does not exceed the resourcing available. At the moment

in Swaraj and Unitierra this is not a problem as the lack of public recognition means that large-scale uptake amongst the general population is unlikely. But an increase of demand in the future would strain the ability of the institution to keep an open gate. Furthermore, gates serve the purpose of selecting those students who are able to take advantage of the learning opportunities: so in most cases, universities require students already to have basic competencies and skills in place in order to engage meaningfully with the material. Having to provide the basic tuition in addition to the specialised in-depth learning characteristic of the university, may prove significant strain on the viability of the institution.

Staley's (2019) imagined future institutions – such as *Platform University* and *Microcollege* – address these practical problems through having organic structures through which these pedagogical encounters can rise and fall over time, raising and allocating their own funds, while the platform remains as a stable hub within which this interaction can occur. However, it is not clear how easy that model would be to implement in practice, particularly in resource-constrained contexts, and without commercialisation of the venture. The challenges of resourcing and public recognition are not trifling, and dissuade most innovators from creating their higher education experiences entirely outside the mainstream system. Nevertheless, the analysis above shows the level of rupture that can be achieved when an initiative is not tied into legal, political, funding and accreditation frameworks. While the impacts in practice require further empirical research, their role as a beacon of possibility, and an instrument for the freeing of the imagination, is undeniable.

Future Directions

In reforming the university, therefore, we need to look beyond surface adjustments in systems and institutions to the deeper structures that determine the practices of the institution and its relationship to society. Efforts to decolonise the curriculum, build a representative student and staff body, and transform universities for sustainability will only bear fruit if we simultaneously pay attention to the nature of the institution, and the need to challenge its underlying logic.

In reassessing the institutional nature of the university, it is important to bear in mind that even conventional mainstream examples have fairly loose institutional framing in many respects. There is weak control on staff members for example, with academics commonly criticising their own institutions publicly, and little expectation of following a 'party line': when academics or students speak in public, unless they are specific role holders, it is generally understood that they are expressing their own opinions rather than those of the institution. Furthermore, hierarchical management only functions in certain areas of the university, or in relation to certain dimensions of work, with substantial freedom of working goals and patterns amongst academics (Haddock-Fraser; Rands; Scoffham, 2018).

Significant changes have been brought to the institution in line with neoliberal policies and academic capitalism. New forms of corporate management have attempted to control and regulate the autonomy and organic creativity represented above. On the other hand, commodification and marketisation have loosened institutional control in some ways, while linking universities into capitalist markets in new ways. For-profit universities, for example, which have seen a rapid expansion in recent years have a very wide gate in terms of admissions, commonly admitting all students who are willing to pay the fees and have completed secondary schooling. Income generation drives have also encouraged universities to engage in more fluid ways with external communities and particularly the private sector, and some of the moves towards interdisciplinary work and restructuring of departments and academic identities have also been driven by commercial motivations.

Closely linked to these processes of commodification is that of unbundling, which is easily confused with deschooling or deinstitutionalisation. The process of unbundling (as explored in McCowan, 2017; Ivancheva et al., 2020; Robertson; Komljenovic, 2016) also leads to an unravelling of conventional structures of the institution, but in different ways, with distinct motivations and implications. Unbundling involves the separating out of the constituent elements of the university and the process of higher education: i.e. teaching, research and innovation, or design, delivery and assessment of courses. It certainly presents challenges to traditional gates, roles and badges: in relation to the latter, for example, with micro-credentials starting to challenge traditional composite degrees (Craig 2015). The primary motivation for this separation is commercial: to provide consumers with greater choice over what they buy, and in some cases specialisation and economy of scale from the point of view of the supplier. A fully unbundled higher education experience consists of a range of learning experiences that students can pick from freely, piecing together their unique profile of learning, and seeking micro-credentials in the different areas where appropriate.

While unbundling and deschooling both lead to the end of the university as we know it, the former questions only some of the assumptions of our conventional institutions: while it gives greater freedom of choice to the learner, it is largely based on a transmission model of pedagogy, with learners as receptacles, and depends on assessment and credentials that have exchange value. Furthermore, in contrast to Illich's deschooling, it views the purpose of education as enhanced individual success within a capitalist market, both in selling one's employability and creating innovative products. While barriers to access are challenged, and there is a significant opening up of participation (seen in the most extreme form through the emergence of MOOCs), many other aspects of institutional processes remain largely intact, if appearing in a different guise. Deinstitutionalisation initiatives in higher education, therefore need to position themselves in opposition both to mainstream higher education but also commercially oriented deschooling initiatives.

This article is not in fact arguing that the mainstream university as an institution is inherently flawed. For sure, it has taken on many of the pernicious influences of the different ages in which it has existed – and in the contemporary moment, of global capitalism – and has a mixed record in relation to promoting public goods, equality and environmental sustainability. But it is far from the worst of our contemporary institutions, and still provides opportunities for critical thought, alternative visions and personal and collective transformation. The point made here is that space needs to be created for the emergence of new institutions of higher learning alongside the university, with differences not in the surface trappings, but in the deep assumptions and fundamental practices.

Illich may have been too harsh on the school. As an institution it has a number of positive attributes, and even in difficult circumstances around the world, and for the most disadvantaged communities, it does provide some opportunities for meaningful learning. Nevertheless, his primary thesis that institutionalisation over time corrupts its original purpose remains intact. The structures put in place originally to support the functioning of the institution – here conceptualised as gates, roles and badges – in many ways undermine that purpose. Importantly, they are confused for the purpose itself: so it is the gaining of a place at Harvard, and obtaining the MBA qualification that has value, not the experience and personal transformation themselves.

If the experiences of deinstitutionalisation outlined here catch on, it will lead to disruption of higher education systems – and very likely to a reduction in resources available, as individuals, corporations and states see them as less instrumentally valuable in the achievement of various goals, primarily economic. But the size and stature of the global higher education system is not our only concern. Better a small university network faithful to its mission and with a positive impact on society than a large one without. In fact, it is possible to see the downfall of universities as residing in this very compromising of their own mission in search of expansion and increases in resources at all costs.

Experiences such as Swaraj and Unitierra show us that it is possible to subvert and reframe even the foundational structures of the institution, and still uphold its primary purpose – indeed, fulfilling it better for communities that have been excluded from conventional higher education institutions. What these innovations give us more than anything is a boost for our imagination. After centuries of deep rooting of a dominant educational model, imagining an alternative – a real alternative, and not variations in tone – is a significant challenge. But it is one we must overcome if we are to retain the original purposes of the university and to address the environmental and civilisational crises facing humanity.

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Notes

- 1 The terms institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation are frequently used in the literature to refer to the committing or discharging of a child or adult to or from an institution (psychiatric hospital, orphanage, prison etc.). They therefore deal with questions of where the individual is best located, whether within the institution or in the community. This article does not use the terms in this sense, but instead in relation to the development or deconstruction of institutional apparatuses.
- 2 Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira.

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Tristan McCowan is Professor of International Education at the Institute of Education, University College London. His work focuses on higher education and international development, and his latest book is *Higher Education for and beyond the Sustainable Development Goals* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0710-7519>

E-mail: t.mccowan@ucl.ac.uk

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