

## Chapter 2

# Placing a New University Model Within the Discourse of Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

*A historical analysis of the discourse of the purpose of higher education provides a typology of four distinct discourses which reflect the social, political, and economic context within which the changing rationale for funding universities has been defined. By analyzing where a technology-driven, international university could be located in the interstices of these competing discourses, the typology can assist educational leaders, administrators, and policymakers to more readily identify key obstacles to be overcome, opportunities that could be developed, and the latent dysfunctions that need to be anticipated to avoid both collateral damage and the resulting determined pushback. Forewarned is forearmed, and understanding which aspects of which discourses lend support or undermine such a project could greatly assist proponents in seeking support and avoiding missteps.*

### INTRODUCTION

If one's goal is to build an accessible, technology-driven, international institution of higher learning, then one has to be prepared to defend the need for both a new institution and a new approach. The question naturally arises, "What is the *purpose* of this new institution or this new approach?"

Before attempting to respond, educational leaders, administrators, and policy-makers need to understand that the purpose of higher education has been the subject of intense debate that draws on four distinct (often contradictory) discourses. Adoption of online delivery or open access, for example, can

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only be successful if relevant audiences can be convinced the new platform fits within their preconceptions of what legitimately constitutes an institution of higher education.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide a historical context for the rest of the papers in this volume. As others analyze the technological advances creating a new type of learning experience, or speak to the increasingly competitive nature of the post-secondary education market, or address issues of open access through the ubiquitous availability of smart phones, and so on, this paper provides a typology within which to situate, and thereby analyze, these other discussions. Identifying and understanding the underlying *assumptions* about the purpose of higher education contained within each of these other papers will assist the reader in deconstructing, and thereby evaluating, the arguments presented.

Following the historical analysis, the second half of the paper lays out—in very broad strokes—the implications of our typology of discourses for the four issues of open admissions; online instead of face-to-face classrooms; a focus on the learning module; and international structures. There is no attempt to define a new discourse that would encompass all the new developments in higher education represented in the current volume, because we consider it unlikely that there is a single, one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, our purpose is to flag for readers that, implicit within each of these various issues and proposals, is an underlying set of assumptions about the purpose of higher education that needs to be made explicit. It is up to the proponents of each of the many different proposals to analyze the implications of their position and to decide which elements can safely be situated within existing discourses, which may require compromise or rethinking.

Historically, different discourses have appealed to different stakeholders, so any new type of post-secondary institution needs to adopt the appropriate discourse for the audience addressed. If one wishes to obtain government funding and taxpayer support, for example, the institution needs to reference the manpower and economic needs of that region, which might be seen to conflict with a model premised on a global faculty or student market. Understanding and being able to make explicit the underlying assumptions about the purpose of higher education is crucial to understanding what is at stake for various publics, and how best to address their concerns.

As noted in a previous article (Runté & Runté, 2017), however, the four distinct discourses of our typology are routinely confabulated, as institutional spokespersons tailor their pitches to suit the audience they are currently addressing. Unfortunately, when held to account on the implications of these statements, the institution finds itself under siege for failing to fulfill all of these—frequently mutually contradictory—goals. It is therefore crucial that proponents of this new type of institution understand to which purposes of higher education they wish to lay claim.

## **HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF FOUR DISCOURSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

A historical overview charting shifts in the debate over the appropriate goals of higher education is necessary to understand both what those competing arguments are and why different rationales came to dominate at different points in history. As the saying goes, those who do not understand the mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them, so it is important to avoid adopting an obsolete discourse to which relevant stakeholders have already developed counter arguments, or which are logically incompatible with one's vision, if there are other discourses more clearly aligned with one's own purposes. Higher education is subject to intermittent waves of reform (Forstenzer, 2017), not all of which have worked

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