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1

The University as a World Institution

The university has prospered to an astonishing extent over a millennium, and especially over the last half century. It has grown in numbers, reach, and scope, and it has diffused worldwide. In this book, we reflect on the university's sweeping expansion and its centrality in a contemporary global society built on liberal and neoliberal institutions.¹ We delineate multiple dimensions of expansion, giving special attention to the growing cultural content included in the university and in a public society deeply intertwined with the university. We attend both to those entities that claim explicit university status and to those—like many “colleges”—whose credentials and content are clearly oriented to the university world. In both cases, the local organizations gain their authority and credibility through their membership in a great imagined now-global institution: the university.

Thus, while it is common to refer, in social discourse and in social scientific research, to particular local organizations as universities, and to particular professors or graduates as members of specific organizations, this is substantially misleading. The local organization in fact gains its standing because it is an instance of something much larger—the university as an institution. And while the professors and graduates may appear to come from a particular local organization, their social status—registered in every role they play through life and into their obituaries—is mainly as members of this grand institution.² Thus the impact of the university on their own lives (and society) transcends the impact of the particular local organization in which they may have studied or worked. It lasts through the whole life span and beyond. Local university organizations may fail, and are certainly often ineffective, but their graduates

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are still certified graduates. They are likely to be very conscious of this, as are those around them. The point is central to sociological institutional theory.³

This defining feature of the university, throughout its long history, is partly implied in its name—which is employed practically everywhere (e.g., *universiteit*, *unibersitate*, and *universitas*, in Afrikaans, Basque, and Javanese, respectively). Its special jurisdiction is a peculiar form of understanding claiming status as knowledge. Unlike other forms of understanding, such as intuition or experience, academic knowledge is seen to be universal, holding across time and space. It is furthermore explanatory and thus presupposes a general underlying base in some form of rationality or lawfulness. Knowledge, as seen in the university world, also maintains an appearance of unity and coherence, such that it seems reasonable to include wildly diverse ideas under one organizational and cultural umbrella: any particular university organization—even one named after a special icon, saint, or place—does not claim a distinctive knowledge base. Knowledge is thus a feature of the university as an institution, and a local organization because of its linkage to the institution.

Knowledge is not only seen as universal and rational and unified but is also deemed to be comprehensible by all those everywhere who have gone through the appropriate rituals of education. It is ultimately the same for everybody—across a world with great variation in other aspects of culture and resources—and is in principle (and increasingly in practice) accessible by properly socialized people across the widest range of circumstances. These people are, thus, importantly members of the great institution of the university, not only or primarily of specific organizational instances of it. And they are seen—and are likely to see themselves—as permanently linked to the knowledge of the university. Their occupational, political, economic, and social statuses rest on it, as do their self-conceptions: their experiences are filtered through these social and psychological identities.

Powerful cultural assumptions, religious in origins and still quasi-religious in character, are involved here, constituting the university's distinctive cultural foundations. The institution's religion-like quality remains elusive if religion is conceived strictly as nonrational beliefs held by individual persons. It makes more sense when religion includes the cultural cosmologies or “sacred canopies” that have been so central to the definition of religion historically and anthropologically. The latter provide the roots of the university and the academic knowledge it carries.⁴

Originally especially Western, many cosmological assumptions at the heart of the university have spread around the world in the current period, as is emphasized by the sociological neo-institutionalism that provides the theoretical grounding for this book.⁵ Most significantly:

- a. There is the idea of a great and expanding body of knowledge that is universally or ultimately true. It is based on an underlying (and

- expanding) cosmological supposition that many aspects of reality occur under conditions or terms that are the same everywhere and always. No one imagines, for example, that gravity is culturally or historically contingent (though it turns out that it might be). An implication is that there is a singular source of being.
- b. There is the idea that the terms of natural and social life are not only universal but also logically structured and causally interconnected. This implies that the source of being in the cosmos is rational, establishing regular relationships between cause and effect and between antecedent and consequent. The gods involved, that is, are not crazy, and bestow basic causal order on an integrated reality.
 - c. There is the idea that knowledge is coherent and unified and can be examined, learned, and taught under one cultural and organizational frame. This implies that there is no segmentation among specific bodies of true knowledge; Zeus and Poseidon are reconciled. Ultimately, knowledge folds into one.
 - d. There is the idea that individual humans everywhere can in principle acquire true knowledge. It is not inscrutable or forbidden. This implies a universal and very strong status for properly saved or elevated (i.e., educated⁶) persons, across widely disparate social groups and increasingly across status barriers such as nationality, race, and gender. Humans can, in principle, apprehend the universal truths. And once properly certified, the schooled human is treated as in permanent possession of the relevant knowledge. Diplomas, mattering greatly in social life, are rarely rescinded. Occupational success may be followed by subsequent failure: educational success is permanent.

These assumptions, secularized, help constitute the cosmological foundations of the university. Contemporary universities are often contrasted with, and even opposed to, what are now narrowly conceptualized as religious institutions. But these are near competitors. Fundamentally, both institutions make the same promise: to explain the fundamental nature of being by interpreting local facts in light of transcendent truths.⁷ And both institutions have encompassing reach, covering everything from the genesis of the Earth and the origins of life down to the properties of bacteria. Understanding the university on these terms, as built on foundations reflecting and parallel to religious ones, helps us understand its trajectory over time.

First, a religious or cosmological imagery helps explain why the university has survived intact over hundreds of years from its medieval origins through the whole current period. The secularized social differentiation that is often held up as the hallmark of modernity is seen to involve increasingly specialized understandings in increasingly specific domains. Perhaps, therefore, we should

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expect teaching and inquiry to differentiate into distinct educational organizations for different sectors of society. But this happens only very partially and mainly internally to the university. Instead of fragmenting, the university expands as a grand umbrella, coming to shelter ever more cultural materials (encompassing, for instance, the once vulgar matters of moneymaking and sexual behavior). It is only when we recognize the cultural impulse to tie local (often occupational) understandings to universal truths that we can appreciate why the university persists and rises as a focal institution in an increasingly globalized but “stateless” and fragmented world. Skilled techniques can be, and mostly are, mastered with real-world practice. Understanding how specific techniques relate to universal knowledge (e.g., how bean counting relates to accounting) requires something called education.

Second, a framework sensitive to the close parallels with religion helps explain why the university, in quite standardized form, has diffused globally, across societies varying greatly in local beliefs and resources. One now finds universities—recognizably similar, at least in aspiration—in countries of every stripe and stratum. This makes sense only if one remembers that the university’s priorities are not local needs and realities but surpassing truths.⁸ As generalized visions of society envelop every community and embrace the whole world—economically, politically, and socially—the universalized knowledge system does too, rooting all kinds of people and activities in a common bed of knowledge. Circumstances vary, but the truth does not.

Third, seeing the parallel with religion helps explain why the university extends to encompass so many more people, across every identity and role. Social and occupational differentiation occurs everywhere and increases everywhere. But increasingly over the modern (post-1800), high modern (post-1945), and hyper-modern (post-1990) periods, the great bulk of differentiation occurs on a standardized foundation of personhood and under the standardized umbrella of universal knowledge.⁹ New and old identities and roles—including those once sequestered in family and community life—can and now must be understood to occur under general laws based on universal truths. Thus, for example, educated women are thought to make better mothers, in part because they are prepared to consult a wide variety of even more educated professionals in medicine, psychology, schooling, recreation, and law.¹⁰

Fourth, conceiving of the university in cosmological terms helps explain why it continuously swallows up bodies of formerly segmented cultural content. With the rise of the “knowledge society,” all sorts of idiosyncratic meaning systems are re-established on rationalized and universalized grounds¹¹. The cultural content of the university thus expands, enabling the organized polity and the monetarized economy—long since heavily standardized—to incorporate the widest array of materials, many far removed from power and production. If

anti-liberal movements in the world continue to prosper as they have since 2010, this process may slow, but over recent decades the growth has been dramatic: even the work of sociologists is now counted as part of the GDP.

Our approach to the university here runs parallel to our approach to contemporary society, and especially the global knowledge society, which is grounded in the same cultural elements that undergird the university. Both are built on assumptions of standardized and rationalized universalism. Just as nature in one place is analyzed as if it were comparable to nature in others, so also, strikingly, is social structure, so that good economic or public policy in one country, justified by economic and political science, is good policy elsewhere and everywhere.¹² Professionals, whose roles are justified in terms of putatively universal truths, reign throughout.¹³ Especially in the era of hyper-modernity, contemporary society shares its cultural undergirding with the university. While it is surely differentiating, society is at the same time anchored in the universalized and unified cultural sediment of the university.

Conceiving of the university in quasi-religious terms helps explain its worldwide explosion. But much of the academic and policy literature takes a different approach, seeing the university as a technical-functional apparatus, expected to produce skilled labor and specialized information useful for real-world economic and political practices.¹⁴ Of course, some operations of the university directly impact technical roles and functions in society. But the institution and its meaning system are generally decoupled from immediate utility, opening a knowledge umbrella over local life rather than creating its controls and instrumentation.

The conventional approach to the university leads to a heavy emphasis on variations in the university's formal organizational structure, as seen in the substantial literatures focusing on loci of power, governance, and decision-making. These notoriously vary among countries,¹⁵ typically in response to variations in national political structures.¹⁶ In some countries, the professors dominate, while in others, students or state authorities (or, it is thought, even corporations) hold sway. This work often has difficulty spelling out the consequences of organizational variations: there is a common university model, and students, faculty, and research all circulate—or are thought of as able to circulate—more or less freely. Indeed, from a larger perspective, the variations seem to matter little; the university as an institution—a cultural entity rather than an organizational one—has a universalized quality.

The conventional approach to the university also begets heated cycles of critique and reform, in both the world's centers and its peripheries. It is common to see the university as reactionary, corrupt, and incompetent to meet the demands of an expanded and differentiated social order. Crisis is envisioned. Associated with these attacks is a picture of a future Golden Age in which university reforms empower the citizens with the advanced knowledge and

skill required in a society built on new technology.¹⁷ This envisions education as a functional component of a rationalized machine, but it involves a distorted conception of both university and society, dramatically underemphasizing their cultural dimensions and engendering surreal levels of decoupling between institutional ideals and organizational practices.¹⁸

The same vision of the university as adapted to and in the service of rapid social rationalization and technical development produces consternation among intellectuals who imagine that each new contact with mundane reality stains the ivory of the tower.¹⁹ A siege mentality is common. Here the Golden Age is not in the future but in an imagined past of intellectual and cultural purity, removed from the vulgar pressures of the present. The imagery bemoans the debasement of a once-elevated mission and raises the specter of the university as the puppet of the economy,²⁰ or the state,²¹ or even the ignominious and self-centered careerism of liberal individualist society.²² Many such depictions envision, usually vaguely, a long-term breakdown from the medieval beginning, when theology stood at the apex of public and academic life, only to be displaced by the vulgarities of public policy, engineering, economics, and surgery.

This is a misleading conception of the past university—and of the society in which it operated. The old medieval and early modern universities prepared men to become priests, lawyers, doctors, and teachers (we return to this point in chapter 3) and could almost be conceived of as trade schools. But this is not quite accurate: the old universities supported the professional roles not with vocational training but rather with elaborated religious and cultural authority—exactly as is the case now with an enormously broadened array of professionalized roles. Conceptions of the elevated society have expanded greatly over the centuries, but their distance from immediate practice was always—and remains—great.

If, in contrast to the technocratic hyperbole, we see the university in more cultural terms—as the institutional locus of faith in universalistic and unified understanding—then we can appreciate the extent to which its penetration of society elevates and in a sense sacralizes so-called mundane reality, christening the hurly burly of ordinary life with the waters of ultimate truth. Certainly in the contemporary system, social change has modified the university; but it is at least equally true that the expanding university has expanded and solidified society's cosmological bases, to the extent that it can now be called the Knowledge Society.²³

In the knowledge society, (a) the identities of persons performing roles and conducting activities are transformed, with materials constructed and animated by the blazing sun of the school and especially the supernova of the university. And (b) the roles and activities themselves are transformed—fused to the bedrock of universalistic rationalism.

Identity: The impact of university expansion on human identity has been overwhelming. Mass education installs personhood, as a cultural frame, on an encompassing basis. Personhood involves entitativity, autonomy, and entitlement to reason. It is institutionalized in human rights, and it is assumed to be invariable across social groups, and indeed the whole world.²⁴ It formally transforms peasants and tribesmen into persons and citizens, rendering them as suitable for membership in the great rationalized organizations of economy and state.²⁵ Higher education takes matters further, conferring actorhood, which assumes that standardized persons exposed to universal truths can behave purposively in and on the increasingly globalized world and now universe.²⁶ Thus, university-educated people the world over can now be seen as empowered social “actors”—a term that has entered the vernacular to describe them.²⁷ Actors legitimately assemble in social movements, seeking change on every front, and form rationalized organizations on massive and global scales, around every conceivable purpose.²⁸ Education, and especially university education, is a foremost means of producing—symbolically, and to some extent in reality—this dramatically empowered individual being. Even ineffective education, properly credentialed, transforms the individual through a whole life course.

The identities involved here are so fundamental that in virtually every national and supra-national stratification system around the world, educational attainment is paramount to social standing: the schooling of people and occupations is the chief ingredient of social status.²⁹ Furthermore, educational attainment is an inalienable identity; it is not contingent on functional role performance. Once attained, the status of the degree-holding graduate is permanent and survives death, appearing in the Wikipedia entry regardless of its relationship or nonrelationship to life activities.

Naturally, the institutional carriers of this magic themselves take on a good deal of charisma, rising far above the mundane. As we discuss in later chapters, a university can take on everlasting permanence transcending ordinary reality: for example, the University of Bamberg in Germany claims a history of over three and one-half centuries, despite the fact that for most of that time it did not exist in the prosaic real world. Relatedly, the occupational structures rooted in the university—and that includes the vast majority of elite positions in a contemporary society—themselves acquire great charisma, as “professions.”³⁰ Beyond their everyday impact, professions and professionals acquire authority, identity, and significance.

Thus, the knowledge society is filled with elements—people, organizations, occupations—that have supra-local and supra-temporal standing, derived in good part from the university as an institution. Such elements occupied a minute space in the medieval world, and a small (though growing) one in the early modern one. In the contemporary knowledge society, sacralized elements

are pervasive, saturating local societies with elevated meaning, and building unified elites for a global society.

Roles and Activities: In the same way that identities are elevated in the knowledge society, the behaviors associated with these structures are transformed as they are grounded in academic knowledge. The activities of the working person—a plumber, say—are modified. They are linked to general standards of toileting, laid out by specialist professors, who produce technologically advanced toilets, the principles of which may be discussed in global conferences.³¹ Beyond work technology, other professors generate codes of safety, worker rights, environmental protection, sewage management, and relevant community policy. All these produce rules governing the activity of the everyday plumber, providing opportunities, protections, and constraints—what may critically be conceived as governmentality.³²

Every activity sector of the knowledge society changes along similar lines, with the installation of universalistic and rationalistic premises. Farming, fishing, and forestry are transformed. Industrial production is affected at every juncture. Much of the commodity economy falls into the hands of large organizations, managed in every department by degree-certified people trafficking in academic understandings. Family life comes to be theorized, as do matters of health and recreation. The political system is penetrated and refashioned, as elevated principles of theorized policy—to be implemented by university-trained officers and legislators—displace raw power in an array of public domains.

Beyond all these transformative effects, the university generates whole new sectors of social life, drawn down from the knowledge created and located in the university, not built up from practical social life. New problems are discovered—e.g., medical, economic, environmental, and social—and new professions and policies spring up to manage them. A contemporary person, for instance, can readily find therapists for problems heretofore unrecognized or understood as matters of destiny or fate (such as aging).

The university, thus, can be seen in quasi-religious terms. Doing so helps explain its persistence and spectacular recent expansion. Doing so also helps us see that the university does at least as much to sacralize contemporary society as society does to pollute the contemporary university. Schofer (1999) strikingly contrasts “the socialization of science” with “the scientization of society.” The latter process is greatly under-analyzed.

Expansion

By all accounts, the university has become a foremost institution in contemporary society. This is widely recognized in discourse and policy at a global level. UNESCO, the World Bank, and many other intergovernmental

and international nongovernmental organizations address the need to improve education generally and higher education specifically.³³ The centrality of the university is also institutionalized at the nation-state level. It is demonstrated by national policies in countries around the world.³⁴

None of this was true a century ago. There was little in the way of global higher-education policy, and even country-level awareness was limited. For example, old U.S. history or civics textbooks, though often written by university professors, barely mentioned universities as central public institutions.

The shift in public attention corresponds to dramatic changes in social reality. Over the last century, the university went through an explosive expansion on many different dimensions. The number of universities in the world multiplied, and universities popped up in even the most peripheral countries. Enrollments rose exponentially, and a university-level education became both custom and norm for large and ever-growing sectors of society. The cultural topics covered by university curricula expanded, and whole new domains of social life (for instance, family relations) yielded to academic scrutiny. Furthermore, all these changes occurred with a good deal of homogeneity around the world, despite their location in a highly differentiated and stratified global society: the same professorships found in core countries also appear in the far Third World.³⁵ A university in one place, as we elaborate in the chapters of this book, is held to the same definition and standards as a university elsewhere: its topics and degrees are quickly recognizable anywhere.

Extraordinary expansion also characterized the relationships between the university and society. As we note above, both identities and roles were resituated along university axes. The core of human identity shifted, as the infusion of universalistic understanding converted passive persons into authorial actors. Older occupations (accountant, for instance, or farmer) came to be staffed by people with university credentials. And a great many new occupations arose, often within the so-called service sector, built up around the knowledge and the certificates of the academic system. The same forces opened and revitalized public policy and collective action.

The changes all told are so great that it is increasingly customary to invoke terms that imply a fundamental transformation in the nature of contemporary society (and models of it reaching far into the peripheries of the world). In a self-referential culture, it now becomes conventional and indeed routine to speak of the knowledge society, or information society, or knowledge economy.³⁶ What is envisioned is a shift in core models of societal development and progress from those based on capital and labor to those based on education and knowledge—so the university becomes central.³⁷

As a result of all these changes, as noted above, education-based social stratification is now standard worldwide.³⁸ In essentially every country, the upper reaches of the status order are built around university education,

university-certified roles, and often university-created roles: education determines the life chances of individuals and their progeny. Culture is similarly stratified. The forms of understanding that command the most social authority derive from the university and the professionals it creates and certifies. Medical remedies, for example, trump folk remedies.

It is important to understand that none of these dramatic changes resulted directly from collective decision-making by states or elites around the world. None was planned, and indeed many occurred despite resistance by relevant authorities, who often saw the university more as a decorative frill (or seedbed of radicalism) than as an essential element in national progress. Further, none of the worldwide changes can be seen to represent simple responses to political or economic developments and their functional requirements. The changes occur in too many countries, varying too greatly in culture and resources, for that to be plausible. It is difficult to demonstrate empirically whether and how university expansion might be a necessary ingredient of development.³⁹ But as a matter of contemporary faith it is so. The relationship is largely impervious to empirical refutation and for the most part taken for granted.

It is interesting to speculate whether the expansion we consider here may be slowed in the future, with declines in the centrality of the liberal and neo-liberal models of society and the world. Criticisms of economic and cultural globalization and universalization conceive of these forces as Western, or American, or Christian, and attempt to formulate alternative models, many of which undercut the centrality of the university and its culture in preference for particularistic cultural roots embedded in nation or religion. Already at present, there is something of a worldwide reaction against educated elites.⁴⁰ The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack lists incidents in more than thirty countries, involving rebels, insurgents, police, militaries, criminal cartels, and so on.⁴¹ Of course the triumph of the university has always come against much opposition, and it only makes sense that opposition continues apace today. Still, we stress that the growth binge of the university and its cultural ideologies is neither inevitable nor inexorable.

The Present Study

Given the conditions we describe above, a substantial problem of explanation arises. Why has an institution so routinely condemned and often historically thought to be on the wane—inefficient and counterproductive—become a central core element in all versions of the virtuous contemporary society?

In this book, we depict and analyze the core changes in the nature, status, and significance of the university. We consider developments over the long stretch of post-Enlightenment modernity but focus most of our attention on post-World War II high modernity and post-Cold War hyper-modernity. In

the present chapter, we provide an overall account. In chapter 2, we describe more specifically the multi-dimensional expansion of the university, focusing especially on its accumulating numbers and global diffusion. A once-parochial institution particular to Western Christendom has spread to all parts of the world—sometimes with colonialism, but often independently, as societies have voluntarily and eagerly subscribed to this institutional goose, hoping for its putative golden eggs.

In chapter 3, we present the exploding numbers and broadening capacities of students and professors, which skyrocket over time, especially as the hyper-modern society assembles around the university-based knowledge system. Raw numbers expand exponentially. Schooling is seen as relevant for more and more sorts of people—and more dimensions of these people are activated and incorporated. And the school certificates run unimpeded through the whole life course, of import long after any actual knowledge and skill may have receded. Further, the people involved are seen not simply as passive entrants but as executors of ever more legitimate interests and capacities—above all the general capacity for empowered choice or actorhood.⁴² The properly schooled person is now imagined to be a dramatic social actor, fit to master and change the world, not simply to be a carrier of received culture.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the expansion and transformation of university knowledge, showing the ways that academic understandings penetrate the life world as the university acquires more diffuse authority over nature, society, and the cosmos. Standardized and scientized knowledge reaches into more sectors of reality and more sectors of social life. Increasingly with hyper-modernity, the knowledge changes from passive formats that respect the Mind of God and the Wisdom of the Ancients, to active forms to be acquired and used by empowered stakeholders in an envisioned real world.

Chapter 6 depicts the elaborated and porous interface between the university and society, with special attention to the expanded number and range of linkages. People and knowledge flow from more nodes in the university into more arenas in society: and more and more social interests and problems appear on the university's agenda. There are, by now, essentially no social problems that the university should not responsibly address. And there are no domains of society that should resist its instruction, including religion proper. Interpenetration is extreme.

Chapter 7 analyzes the resultant model of a knowledge society dependent on the credentials and cultural content provided by the university. The defining characteristic of this society is its universalistic rationalism, more than the differentiation theorists have sometimes imagined. In the contemporary period, the university consecrates new types of persons with new forms of understanding of a new kind of world. The university itself is transformed by the now-legitimated dimensions of this world, coming to occupy a central

station. Professors in a dozen different departments of the university can now authoritatively investigate and prescribe behaviors in every social arena—e.g., for teenagers in the back seats of cars—presumably on a worldwide scale.

Issues: Understanding Expansion

The observation that the university is a central worldwide institution in the maintenance of both order and progress has become something of a global cultural convention or cliché. The established global institutions recognize and celebrate it—the World Bank, UNESCO and the whole United Nations system, the European Union, an array of scientific professions, and all the leading national states. That this is so is without question. Why it is so is less clear.

The matter is especially problematic because very different assessments of the university and its relationship with society dominated fifty or sixty years ago. In the war and postwar years, the purpose of the university was an open question. Book titles from the time betray a searching quality: *The Mission of the University*,⁴³ *The Crisis in the University*,⁴⁴ and *The Uses of the University*.⁴⁵ Leading critics at the time tended to see the university as a luxury good and its expansion as orthogonal to, and perhaps inconsistent with, important dimensions of social progress. From a centrist perspective, the expansion or overexpansion of the university was inefficient, and perhaps even channeled social values and resources away from needed economic and social changes. In a conservative view, the situation was even worse—the expanded university system created a “revolution of rising expectations” that might foment political disorder and the dreaded anomie. Even left-wing perspectives had it that the expanded university generated false consciousness—deflecting aspirations away from the core of class conflict. The whole Communist world came to policies restricting higher educational expansion on just these grounds.⁴⁶

From all these points of view, the university was relatively useless as an instrument for basic social progress. Individually it raised human capital,⁴⁷ but collectively its expansion tended to create wasteful or destructive inflationary cycles, with educational credential requirements escalating beyond any social utility in national or global “potlatch” ceremonies. Analysis after analysis told the same story.⁴⁸ Titles, again, convey something of the vision: *The Diploma Disease*,⁴⁹ or *The Overeducated American*,⁵⁰ or *The Credential Society*.⁵¹ These analyses generally assumed that an effective political system would employ state controls to restrict the inflationary expansion involved, and that the exceptionally rapid expansion of higher education in the United States resulted from the weakness of political controls in a federal system.⁵²

All of this reflected a long-held (and perhaps now resurgent) vision of the university as deflecting attention and resources away from the nuts and bolts

of social progress. Thus, a German authority in the interwar period criticized the whole enterprise:

“The steadily rising tide of engineering students in German universities, with consequent overcrowding in the engineering profession, has moved [several trade associations] and other organizations to issue a public warning that a sterile, educated proletariat is being produced without a chance of gainful occupation while millions are wasted on its training.” The comment goes on to refer to the “exaggerated overvaluation of schooling,” which is the notion that higher education is needed to work in “all sorts of activities in industry, trade, and . . . government” and later discuss the “evil . . . erroneous belief [among students] that their diploma will help them more readily develop an income.”⁵³

In short, neither the individual nor society were seen to benefit from an excess of university education, and the term “over-education” was often employed, though decreasingly so over the twentieth century, as shown in figure 1.1, which reports Google Ngram frequencies. In the same vein, the neutral term “school leaving,” implying a legitimate transition from education, was common through the mid-century—to be replaced now by the normative and negative term “school dropout.”⁵⁴

Obviously by the present day, global assessments shifted dramatically. What was a partially dysfunctional prestige good is now axiomatic to social and individual development. The current consensus highlights not over-education but

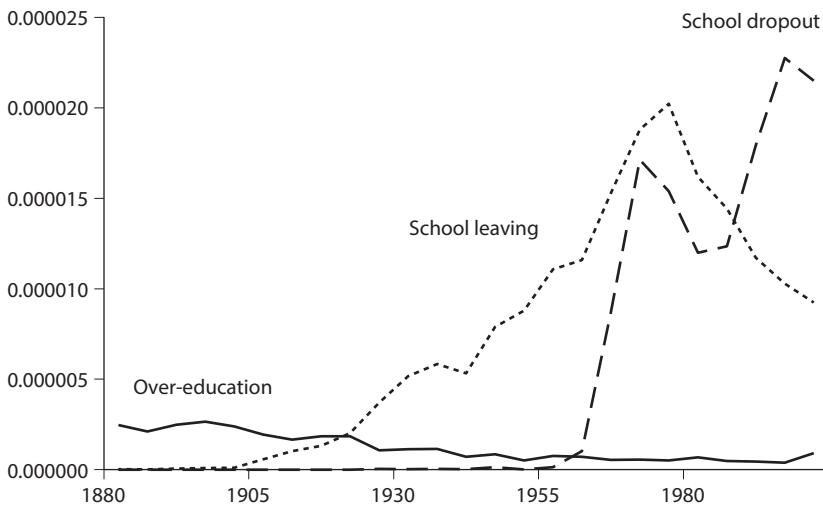


FIGURE 1.1. Frequencies of Over-Education, School Leaving, and School Dropout in the Google Corpus 1880–2000.

under-education: certainly among the poor and marginalized but also among the rich and incorporated; starkly in lesser-developed countries but also in the core.⁵⁵ Higher education now is a never-enough good.

This about-face is mainly a matter of changed cultural faith: the original critical posture had little empirical support, and neither does the new celebration of the university. The expansion of academic higher education, as a general matter, has not been shown to be a strong source of basic economic development. Some studies show effects, while others do not.⁵⁶ Advocates of the university rely heavily on what seem to be positive cases: a Silicon Valley here, a biotechnological industry there, engineering successes yonder, and assorted examples of apparent progress produced by managerial training.

In short, the university and the university system have survived over the millennium, have expanded dramatically in the current period, and have acquired centrality in the structure of contemporary societies. These facts require explanation, particularly in view of the extensive criticisms directed at the university now and periodically throughout its history.

The criticisms make a good deal of common sense, and in one form or another are repeated over the centuries. First, a great deal of the teaching and research done in universities seems to be irrelevant to any plausible social benefit. It is, in a word, scholastic. Or academic. The Ig Nobel Prizes, for example, lampoon “splendidly eccentric” university research, including experiments on the magnetic levitation of frogs (a winner in the year 2000) and observations of contagious yawning among red-footed tortoises (2011). Only tiny proportions of research projects can claim to have convincing direct benefits for one or another dimension of social functioning.

Second, when the university does attempt relevance, harnessing teaching and research directly to role certification (as it increasingly does), it is not well equipped to deliver. Academic schooling is not generally a very good predictor of successful performance in occupational roles, and its institutionalization in particular fields is not known to make performances in that field more effective.⁵⁷ The whole glorified academic tradition runs against much common experience and ideology: if one wants a person to learn to carry out a role well, the best approach is to have the person work at the role under instructional supervision. Most teaching certificates require teaching apprenticeships (in which student teachers work under the supervision of schoolmasters). Most medical licenses require internships and residencies. It makes no sense to isolate trainees in academic settings far removed from practice. Similarly, if one wants to improve organized policy in a domain—on substance abuse, say, or HIV prevention—it is best to work intensively in that domain rather than to consult theorists in universities far removed from the hustle and bustle of daily life.⁵⁸

If the university were in fact an economic tool-house—rather than the cultural canopy that we depict here—it would make sense if this medieval institution had long since fragmented into distinct functionally specific knowledge systems, just as differentiation dramatically impacted every other institution of the period. Indeed, after the Enlightenment, the most progressive polities in the world pushed for functional differentiation. The French Revolution suppressed the university—at least for a few decades—replacing it with specialized training schools.⁵⁹ The Soviets followed suit a century and a half later.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the radically liberal United States successfully avoided anything like a gold-standard European university until late in the nineteenth century: the country’s scientific development mostly lay elsewhere, and its colleges focused on socialization more than academics. Instead, in the knowledge arena, there were apprenticeships and dedicated professional schools—seminaries, medical schools, law colleges, etc.⁶¹

In that earlier period, U.S. higher education was notable for its lack of closure. There were, or seemed to be, stand-alone schools on every street corner, dissociated from one another and from the state and from any overarching body of knowledge or integrated system of higher education. The prospects for university-level theology had died in the U.S. with the “separation of church and state” and the rise of new lower-church denominations that relied on looser (if any) forms of training.⁶² The hopes for university law and medicine were dimmed by the widespread Jacksonian destruction of their monopolies, which opened these professions to the loosest forms of credentialing and testing. Any lawyer with an office and a few books could open a “law school”,⁶³ and quack doctors abounded. Professional ranks thus expanded and unemployment ensued. The old Eastern schools tried to resist, but democratic and populist criticism prevailed. Likewise, the potential for university-level philosophy—which in Europe produced “professors” for the old elite gymnasia—faltered under the open-market conditions of the U.S., which enabled a range of colleges, specialized academies (now known as prep schools), and common high schools (which Friedenberg [1965] calls “the prison of democracy”) to stake claims in the field.

The puzzle: differentiation generally transformed the institutional landscape after the Enlightenment. Economically, the feudal estate broke into component parts, and elementary forms of production and exchange moved off to town. The old estate-system polity broke up, too, and there appeared an array of specialized bodies devoted to public security and general welfare. The old family system likewise differentiated and outsourced many dimensions of child-rearing, socialization, elder care, and so on to schools, workplaces, hospitals, orphanages, therapeutic facilities, and the like. And with successive waves of globalization, enormous differentiation and inequality between strata in global society appeared. How and why did the university avoid the seemingly inexorable path toward differentiation (or fragmentation)?

Sources of Expansion

It is still common, following Mandeville, to think of the Enlightenment as involving the discovery of “society,”⁶⁴ the conception of which had been limited previously. In the medieval and early modern worlds, a moral order was envisioned above the dross of mundane life (including the landowning elites) with ties to the sacred: the church and the monastic orders, with theology and the canon law; the state and civil law; medicine and the rituals of life and death; and some rational knowledge from the ancient philosophers. To live virtuously, one should withdraw from the ordinary corrupt world and enter into this realm. The medieval and early modern university thus did not serve society in any encompassing sense; its warrant was more restricted and transcendent.

The Enlightenment and its aftermath transformed the university, symbolized by the watershed (though often-unimplemented) reforms of Humboldt in the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ The shift followed less from organizational modifications than from a broader cultural change, involving the discovery, or constitution, of society—an expansive and rationalized social body capable of “progress” and “justice,” linked to the national state and the imagined national community.⁶⁶ The process secularized but also essentially sacralized great swathes of social life, envisioned in terms of the rational and the universal, thereby creating a great new role for the university. Rapid expansion followed. New sciences were codified and entered the university in waves, often conflicting with the older and narrower religious patterns. The conflicts indicate the degree to which the newer culture itself encroached on religious territory and competed on religious grounds.

The twentieth century—especially its last half—showed an even more dramatic increase in the rate of university expansion worldwide. It followed again from transforming models of society, linked to a dramatically increased awareness of supra-national interdependence or globalization.⁶⁷ Two devastating world wars, a massive depression, enormous violations of human rights and welfare, and the rise of a nuclear age and a Cold War made it clear that a world of demonically sovereign national states and societies could not be sustained. The breakdown of the earlier colonial systems, creating a raft of uncontrolled weak nation-states, made the resultant disorder palpable.⁶⁸ A larger world—underwritten by sweeping rationalism and universalism—presented itself as an alternative: a world that could not in practice be anything like a national state writ large.

It is thus useful to see the high-modern period since the Second World War as carrying a great cultural wave that intensified with post-Cold War hyper-modernity (and now may be faltering). The emerging model centered on a cluster of variables, all prominently cultural. The charismatic national state was partly replaced with a notion of the charismatic rights-bearing human individual—and human rights principles expanded on a global scale.⁶⁹ In

parallel, mass education expanded everywhere.⁷⁰ A scientized knowledge system superseded disparate and conflictful world religious ideas, enabling rationalized universalism on a scale transcending any particular national state or ethno-religious community.⁷¹ The university arose to become the central sense-making institution, linking individuals and local settings to the emergent universal cosmos—on global and even broader bases, with growing interest in natural and perhaps social phenomena (e.g., space exploration and extraterrestrials) in the galaxy and beyond.⁷²

If we understand the university as the locus of interpretable order in a rapidly globalizing, but stateless, world society, many striking phenomena make sense. First, we can understand the university's global expansion, which creates a common global elite with a great deal of shared culture. Second, we can understand the drive toward isomorphism in disparate societies—the anxiety with which local universities aspire to ape their betters—and rampant resultant decoupling. Third, we can understand the shift in university cultural content from passive and contemplative forms of knowledge to active and applied forms, suitable for policy and problem solving.⁷³ Fourth, we can understand why most of the recent expansions in university domains occurred in the social and socio-sciences (including medicine and engineering) rather than in the natural sciences or cultural arenas.⁷⁴ The social scientization of aspects of life formerly hidden behind the curtains of local or even national societies permits contemporary students to comfortably prescribe law and policy for countries they have never seen—and indeed for the whole world.

The transformation in models of society and of the university thus changes the relation between them. While the medieval university served the church (and the derived emergent state), and the modern one served the national state (infused with the religious charisma of nationalism), the hyper-modern university of today does much more. It creates society and progress, defining both in grand schemes of rationalism and universalism.

Education as Driving Progress

Thus, the university's rising centrality, especially in the post-World War II era, was produced by fundamental reconstitutions of the context. The university itself, in its core definition and purpose, changed only modestly amidst expansion. What changed were the notions of nature and society in which the university is culturally and organizationally embedded.

Over the long arc from the modern to the high modern to the hyper-modern periods, the premise of universalistic rationalism saturated more and more segments of reality. Once applied mainly to the cosmos, the framework first seeped into natural domains, and then, much later—with the taming of the nation-state—permeated social domains. The university expanded accordingly.

Over the centuries, its focus on the theology and law opened to include medicine and philosophy and then later the natural sciences and then finally much later the social and “applied” or socio-sciences. A wave followed the Enlightenment, with the rapid incorporation of the natural sciences. Another great wave followed World War II, with the rise of the social and socio-sciences.

The causal structure often imagined here, by scholars and laypersons alike, is that social development toward differentiation and functional complexity elevated demand for expanded and specialized understandings and roles of the sort produced in the university. Socioeconomic progress demanded university expansion.

But increasingly through the last century this causal structure was reversed in both theory and reality. Instead of reflecting social progress, education came to be seen as creating it—creating the people (especially the actors) and the knowledge (and role structure) of an ever-expanding value system. Much of the widespread imagery about the knowledge society and economy captures this central idea. We have moved from the materialism of a modernity rooted in agricultural and industrial production—very material businesses indeed—to the more ethereal, and often even virtual, monetized values of the professionalized service sector.

In the contemporary hyper-modern world, thus, the university plays a role analogous to that of the high church in the medieval world, and the more secularized churches in the modern one. It offers authoritative answers to all of life’s ultimate questions (and also plenty of trivial ones). It is professors, not priests, who unlock the secrets of the universe.

The analysts who so bitterly criticize the contemporary university, as noted above, may imagine an earlier Golden Age when the institution was less contaminated by linkages to social reality. They fail to understand the extent to which the university is involved in constructing and reconstructing, and sacralizing, society itself. The professors who address once mundane matters of family life, interpersonal interaction, organizational management, or dietary propriety do so with all of the elevated sobriety of their predecessors. In both cases, they are contemplating the infinite.

Overview: An Institutional Perspective

The university is not particularly successful at training people effectively to carry out social roles, nor is it especially capable of generating research that contributes directly to social and economic development. Emphasizing these facets of the university cannot explain its historical survival, contemporary expansion, and relative homogeneity in a very diverse world.

If the university is not very good at organizing people and understandings for immediate applications in the here and now, an institutional perspective

suggests that it is dramatically successful at integrating the widest range of humans and beliefs and practices around the unified principles of a universally lawful culture.⁷⁵ The disparate bodies of understanding and the differentiated roles for which the university's credentials apply all are symbolically rooted in one cosmic location—a location recognized and validated within one great university system, originally reaching to all of (principally Western) Christendom, and now covering the globe.

The university transforms particularities into generalities; it rearranges local concreteness into universal abstraction; it positions tangible persons and pertinent facts against comprehensive cultural backdrops of encompassing applicability. The principles and practices of carpentry may vary from place to place, but the principles and practices of physics (or, originally, theology) are the same everywhere, and are recognized as such. A master carpenter may or may not get recognition upon moving from one country to another; a PhD in physics would more likely be acknowledged. The categories of schooled people come to be universalized not because their technical roles are uniform but because they rest on a common foundation of universal truths.

So schooled people, in their most important social identities, are seen as having universalized status. This is rooted in and celebrated by the expansive contemporary principles of universal human rights. Everyone has the intrinsic capacity to access the universal truths, and thus everyone should be educated—not just trained to do things but educated to understand things. Education for All is an enormously successful global social movement.⁷⁶

Further, the ultimate cultural substance of role performance is also universalized. A wide range of occupational activities is conceived and reconceived, and at least in principle controlled, in light of universal general principles. Thus, the roles should be schooled. Beyond occupations, many other central social roles come to be seen as requiring educational rooting in universal truths. Schooling creates better parenting, and there arises a host of instructional and therapeutic roles designed to transmit the correct effects. Schooling enhances recreational experiences and athletic accomplishments, and one can get a range of academic degrees in the relevant roles. Schooling produces better citizens, better persons, and better selves.

Indeed, every social sector in contemporary society now rests on bases in rationalized and universalized knowledge. This is true even at the peripheries of society, among the marginalized and outcast. For instance, successful criminal gangs and terrorist groups increasingly rely on general principles of accounting and strategic planning and parade their technical sophistication. The academic system has not yet produced specialized training in these areas, but many general degrees suggest applicability and relevance.

Our Approach

In the chapters that follow, we lay out our arguments and offer empirical support. We stress the transcendence and universalism of the university and therefore pitch our arguments at the global level. Of course, we acknowledge variations, though they are not our main focus. We expect university expansion to occur earlier and perhaps more fully in the global core than in the global periphery, in democracies than in dictatorships, in the natural sciences than in the social sciences or especially the humanities, and in world-class research universities more than local teaching colleges, etc. These variations are important, and we salute the large literature devoted to exploring them. But our main agenda is otherwise: we highlight the university as a global institution and the global knowledge society that arises upon it.

The empirical support we offer is intended to illustrate, not to prove, the corresponding arguments. Our study is not a hypothesis-testing exercise. The empirical materials do not count as “evidence” in the classic sense but rather exemplify and illuminate broader trends. Of course, we present broader data—covering more countries through some period of time—when we are able. But even these seldom constitute a systematic sample. More commonly, we present illustrations, drawing from as many countries and as many kinds of countries as available data will allow.

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