



## Education's "Three E's" and the McUniversities: Some Heretical Thoughts<sup>1</sup>

**Panduka Karunanayake**

Professor in Clinical Medicine, Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Colombo

### ABSTRACT

An attempt to improve effectiveness in higher education must start by defining what higher education is. Higher education, however, has faced enormous challenges and undergone significant changes in the last six or seven decades, leading to a situation where its very definition has become vague, fluid, and contested. It is, however, imperative that we face this history and these difficulties. The introduction of Education's "three E's" – equity, effectiveness, efficiency – has, to a large extent, diverted our attention from the problem of definition to the burden of operationalizing the three E's. This has contributed to the introduction of instrumental rationality into higher education, converting universities into "McUniversities". It is now time to take a step back and examine these issues, as a pre-requisite to successfully improving higher education. This has become even more important with the COVID-19 pandemic, as it threatens to provoke drastic changes in higher education.

### KEY WORDS:

Higher education, universities, equity, effectiveness, efficiency, McDonaldization, McUniversities

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✉ panduka@clinmed.cmb.ac.lk

In this article, let me share with you some heretical thoughts on higher education's "three E's": equity, effectiveness, and efficiency.<sup>2</sup> I will also visit the concept of the McDonaldization of society (Ritzer, 2006), and its incarnation in the universities, the McUniversities. My main argument is that these pressures and transformations have changed the nature of higher education, and that it is time we recognized this and took corrective steps. I will also try to connect with the current "new normal" that has arisen with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic – with its own threat of further externally-imposed change.

### Define or be Defined

The Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness (SLAIHEE) is dedicated to enhancing effectiveness in higher education. To start this onerous task, we should first define, or at least describe, higher education. The iconoclastic psychiatrist Thomas Szasz warned us that if we don't define ourselves, others will go on to define us: "Define or be defined." We will then be relegated to a life of living that definition or endlessly contesting it. I would ask you to dwell on this and to ask yourself, has this happened to us already?

This is even more important in the immediate aftermath of a major event like the COVID-19 pandemic, after which we can expect a lot of change (which has been called the "new normal"). At such times, it is our definition that will allow us to safely navigate ourselves through the turbulent sea of change, preserve higher education, and seek its effectiveness.

Defining higher education is, however, a very difficult task. A few academics have nevertheless tried to grapple with it, and my own favorite is Ronald Barnett (1990; 1996). Barnett asked many of the right questions, even if he could not conclusively answer them. He might not have given the final, clinching definition or even a description of higher education. Indeed, we perhaps don't even know what higher education is *not*! But thanks to academics like him, we at least know that we don't know – and that, as Socrates said, is the first step to wisdom and, as Bloom's revised taxonomy puts it, is in the highest knowledge category, known as metacognition.

It was also Barnett's writings that convinced me that we must engage with these problems, not as a hobby or an afterthought, but as a priority. Some academics are happy to live their lives in accordance with a definition given to them. When they see other academics like me who think about these issues, they would accuse us of wasteful self-indulgence because we do not seem to contribute to the knowledge production that the externally given definitions demand. But Barnett disagreed, and pointed out that, on the contrary, *not* to think about these issues is high hypocrisy (1990, p. 4). He asked, how can we *not* self-examine ourselves when we make it our business to examine everything around us?

## Higher Education in a Changing World

Higher education worldwide has changed drastically over the last six or seven decades due to external pressure. For instance, in the 1960s the emergence of the knowledge industries created an increased demand for knowledge workers who had to be educated to the tertiary level, leading to what is known as the massification of universities. The universities changed from elite organizations that served a small number of educationally-gifted students to large-scale organizations serving students with a wider range of abilities.

In the 1970s, there was a clear, watertight demarcation between higher education and further education, both of which were forms of tertiary education. Further education spread across a wide spectrum and included various types of technical and vocational education. Some of these were subsequently incorporated into universities due to a constellation of factors. It was then no longer quite clear whether university education was synonymous with higher education. It certainly seemed like a marriage of convenience, where both partners chose to ignore their incompatibilities so that they could enjoy the considerable benefits of being nominally paired, if not conjugated. The term further education is no longer in much use.

Some of the features that were believed to belong to higher education, rather than further education, such as critical thinking, were then identified, dissected, listed, and added to curricula, as if higher education was no longer the mystery. In time, however, the vacuousness of this approach has come to light. For instance, critical thinking has been separated from critical thinking *skills* and other elusive aspects of *criticality*, variously called critical being, critical self-reflection, and so on (Barnett, 1996, 11–22).

The 1970s were a time of economic woes for the world, even the West, with the so-called slow economic depression. State funding for universities was reduced, even while the demand for graduates from the new knowledge industries was increasing. In that context, by the 1990s, Economics and its new methods became increasingly important in government policies and strategies worldwide, pushed especially by the World Bank, leading to the talk of the three E's of education: equity, effectiveness, efficiency (Lockheed & Hanushek, 1994).

Another change came in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet bloc, when capitalist industries quickly gained control over all forms of life – human, animal, plant – and even the inanimate environment, and all roads led to Washington. In this new unipolar world, knowledge production underwent a marked, cataclysmic transformation too, in the space of a few decades (Gibbons et al., 1994). Since funding sources for research in universities also shifted hands from unrestricted governmental grants to granting agencies that laid down restrictive criteria of prioritization and selection, it was only a matter of time before research in universities itself changed its nature (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Changes to Knowledge Production in the Aftermath of the Fall of the Soviet Bloc**

| <b>Knowledge production then</b>   | <b>Knowledge production now</b>  |
|--|--|
| All fields, including the social sciences & humanities   | Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)   |
| By academics in universities, public intellectuals   | By universities, non-state think-tanks, industrial laboratories, non-governmental organizations                        |
| Small-scale forms of knowledge production, including “appropriate technology” and indigenous knowledge | Large-scale forms of knowledge production, especially industry-driven research, with mergers between industrial giants |
| Knowledge for its own sake   | Applied knowledge  |
| Pure or curiosity-driven inquiry   | Problem-solving or problem-oriented inquiry  |
| Propositional knowledge  | Experiential knowing   |
| Debates about ways of knowing  | Extolling sheer information  |

*Note.* Adapted from Barnett, R. (1996). *Higher education: A critical business* (p. 5). The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press; and Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., & Trow, M. (1994). “Massification of research and education”. *The new production of knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies* (pp. 70–89). Sage.

This was soon followed by globalization and the free flow of financial capital and human resources throughout the globe, leading to the vastly increased entry of private capital into higher education. This, in turn, resulted in the emergence of the internationalization of higher education, cross-border higher education, and the birth of franchised degrees. My favorite author for this period and its issues is Philip Altbach (Altbach, 2006; Altbach & Peterson, 1999; Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004).

Today, academics like Angus Kennedy (2017) have had to point out that universities have lost their way:

Rather than being *relevant* to society, instead the role of the university is a model of how society *should be* [emphases in original]. Its foundation showed that society believed there were higher things, things more important than the material and mundane, and that they were the rightful objects of study by those who had a higher calling, a more noble profession than soldiery, or buying and selling in the marketplace. (p. 51)

Perhaps, the universities had not been ready for these changes with a definition of higher education of their own, or perhaps their own idea of higher education could not stand its ground. Imperceptibly, the three E’s became the new strategies for the universities. Academics didn’t have their own definition or had to ignore it – and the universities underwent change.

If universities were by now having difficulty identifying their exact role in *research*, almost a century before that, they had had difficulty identifying their role in *teaching*. This was in the era before the emergence of the research university, when the university’s role in society was limited to teaching and service. Our own Ananda Coomaraswamy, who

pioneered the struggle for a national university for Ceylon at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote: “Modern education is designed to fit us to take our place in the counting-house and at the chain-belt; a real culture breeds a race of men able to ask, What kind of work is worth doing?” (Oldmeadow, 2000)

Another problem that was thrown in, some time between Coomaraswamy and Barnett, was the challenge posed by post-modernism. Post-modernism has an intense mistrust of all universalisms. So naturally, an idea of the university, or higher education, that stretched across all localities, disciplines, and specializations and claimed to cover them all had to first confront post-modernism. That confrontation too hasn’t gone smoothly.

The purpose of this brief review is not to overwhelm or discourage: rather, it is a call to face this history and these difficulties, and to define ourselves, or at least describe ourselves, or at the very least state what we are clearly *not*. In a way, we must ask Coomaraswamy’s question in relation to work in higher education: what kind of work is worth doing? Otherwise, one day we may wake up and realize that others have defined academia exactly as what it was *not* planning to be, and we will have to choose between either contesting this definition or living our life in accordance with it.

In fact, that might already be the case, except that we haven’t woken up to it yet. For instance, every morning when I wake up, I have to behold, right in front of my house, a well-known private international school offering primary and secondary education that calls itself “International School of Higher Education”!

The task of maintaining our identity, or at least renegotiating it, in the face of changing societal, intellectual, and institutional pressures is certainly challenging – and my plea for all of us is to face it, instead of ignoring it. This has become even more important in the COVID-19 world.

## Equity

*Equity* has been described as freedom from bias or favoritism, and in education this highlights access to education. One might have thought that this was a political project, but today I am rather more inclined to believe that it too is an economic project, driven by the capitalist industries and masquerading as a political project.

To understand this, let us go back to the Industrial Revolution. At that time, the capitalist industries were setting up factories that needed manual labor, and they needed large numbers of factory workers with basic competencies like literacy, numeracy, and punctuality. It was this new set of skills that the schools of the day taught children. Timetables with periods were introduced into schools to instill a sense of time and the habit of working according to the clock. So, school education was at least as much an industry-driven, economics-related project as a political step.

In a similar way, it was the emergence of the knowledge industries of the 1960s that led to the massification of university education. The knowledge industries had had to look for knowledge workers not only from their host countries but also from other countries, at least partly because educating knowledge workers was a very expensive affair.

You might call me a cynic, but I don't see our own education system as much more than a huge, expensive, government-sponsored program to serve the knowledge industries of the First World – not because that is what it should be, but because that is what it is designed to be. It identifies the cleverest of our students through a series of tough competitive exams, gives them a “free” school and university education that – thanks to World Bank-funded projects like the Improvement of Relevance and Quality in Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) project and the Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century (HETC) project – trains them to make them fit for the knowledge industries, and enables their emigration through schemes like PhD scholarships, Green Cards and PR schemes. It is not for nothing that in one of our state universities its undergraduates call the Department of Chemistry the “US visa office”! Often, final-year Engineering students are interviewed by US industries even before they sit their final examination, skimming them off as soon as the examination results are released. Aren't these widely considered the success stories of our education system?

It is a moot point, therefore, as to whether this education system actually benefits our country. Can we really produce new knowledge when we are a long way from the core in the core-periphery relationship of knowledge production? What is worse, we have also introduced an unhealthy sense of competitiveness and a killer instinct to all our students, and indeed even our academics, in a world where you can win only with collaboration and teamwork.

I am indeed aware of the democratic role of education, its role in economic development and preparing the citizens of the future, and the concept of private gains. To champion *these* ideas, however, we first need to completely overhaul our education system, rather than continuing with our present system and simply pumping more money into it. That is known as the fallacy of escalating commitment.

If equity was always a problem, then it has further worsened in the COVID-19 world, where teaching/learning activities are shifting to the online mode or blended learning. The vast majority of our students lack a laptop and WiFi connection and are struggling to keep pace with a smartphone and mobile data package. What are the implications of this unequal distribution of the technology necessary for effective blended learning?

## Effectiveness

*Effectiveness* has been described as the ability to produce a decided, decisive, or desired result. Earlier, when universities were elite organizations with only a small number of intellectually-gifted students, they had small-scale, tutor-led teaching. Undergraduates were more-or-less assured of the transformative education that characterized our past idea of higher education. But with equity and massification, students with less than optimum learning skills – who have been called “subprime students” – also found their way into the universities in the 1970s. In Sri Lanka too, this started with the loss of university autonomy in the 1960s and the district quota allocation in the 1970s, both of which were introduced to bridge the urban-rural divide in university admissions (De Silva, 1974).

It was not that universities were ineffective before – but now, they had to be effective at a new level. If we accept equity for whatever reason, be it economic or political, then we are compelled to accept this need for effectiveness at the new level as well.

Undergraduate education today only produces, at best, knowledge workers for the knowledge industries – whom Lewis Coser (1970) called “mental technicians” rather than “freely speculating minds”. The older conceptualizations of higher education may be more relevant now to *postgraduate* education, especially doctoral research. After all, this is one area where the old-fashioned, small-group, tutor- or supervisor-led, face-to-face encounter still takes place (or is supposed to take place).

Effectiveness itself may sound straightforward, but this too can be questioned. I don’t intend to go into details here, but I will mention in passing three recent developments. The first is the replacement of knowledge-based education by student experience-based education or giving priority to students’ feelings over their knowing (Mieschbuehler, 2017). The second is the arrival of the therapy culture into universities, or the therapeutic university, which will become quite an issue when the so-called Snowflake Generation begins to arrive in the universities during the latter part of the 2020s (Hayes, 2017). The third is the arrival of COVID-19. We now have to reach the majority of our students through the tiny smartphone screen, where our slides are cigarette box-sized and letters are ant-sized, while the students sit in the noisy bustle of their homes rather than the quiet, conducive ambience of a university auditorium. Recently, one of my students joined an online discussion forum through his smartphone, while driving his car!

## Efficiency

I have no desire to argue much more against equity or effectiveness, but I do have extensive misgivings about efficiency. *Efficiency* relates to the input-output ratio: becoming more efficient requires increasing the output, decreasing the input, or both. In relation to education, of course, efficiency means achieving effectiveness at less cost.

The word “efficiency” has positive connotations in our minds, especially if you have studied Physics in school and wondered about how to increase the efficiency of the internal combustion engine and so on. But let me first clarify one point: efficiency is not necessarily a positive phenomenon: it is, in fact, quite a negative one.

The problem with efficiency is that it is necessarily based on a *definition* of a specific *goal*. All definitions of goals are a *narrowing* of our perception of reality rather than an enhancement of it. Reality *itself* is the whole. What we do when we define something is not selecting important parts of it (because reality already *has* those parts!), but unknowingly deselecting the *rest* of reality – so that the selected components of reality are brought into greater focus. Our definition is a *diminution* of reality, which only suits a specific goal at a moment of tunnel-vision. Pursuing efficiency may help us achieve this tunnel-visioned goal, but it will not be good for anything else. We may *deselect* features that we think are unimportant for our immediate goal, or we may even be unaware of their existence.

A tunnel-visioned goal creates an elegant but narrow definition that leads to our strategies. One definition and its chosen strategies may be good for that goal but not for

others. Sociologist H. L. Mencken warned us not to be like “...the one who, on noticing that a rose smells better than a cabbage, concludes it will also make better soup.” You can enjoy the fragrance of the rose, but you mustn’t throw the cabbage away.

Such definitions are not accidental. They are always made from positions of power by people who are in power. This power-laden way of looking at things and defining them in a certain self-serving way is what sociologists call “the gaze”. As sociologist Alex Inkeles put it, “Facts may *speak* for themselves, but they don’t *select* themselves” (1964, p. 3). Selection is an exercise of power. So briefly, definitions are products of gaze, statements of power, and diminutions of reality.

So, what are the features that are *deselected* from reality when people in positions of power apply their gaze on the rest of us to create their definitions? If their main goal is profit, there is a real danger that they will deselect what is not important for them but is important for us, such as humaneness and liberty – things that enhance life but don’t enhance profit.

Of course, we shouldn’t generalize the profit motive itself. There are enough examples of the rich who have spent all their wealth on enriching their society – like Friedrich Engels in nineteenth-century Britain, or our own H. W. Amarasuriya who dedicated his life and wealth to create educational opportunities for everyone in the South. The profit motive is not in itself a bad thing because profits may give sustenance to the educational project. At the same time, what is non-profit is not automatically good for society. So, the real objective should be about being society-focused, not necessarily to do with money or profit, one way or the other.

Today’s world is engulfed by the efficiency *mantra* – not just in education, but throughout society. I am not saying that the world is efficient, or even effective. I am only saying that the world is running to the tune of the efficiency *mantra*, although all that running is not getting us anywhere. It is the *mantra* that is pervasive in society, not efficiency.

### The McDonaldization of Society

To see this pervasiveness, there is no better way than to understand a sociologist from 25 years ago who used an example familiar to us all. That sociologist is George Ritzer, and his example is the fast-food chain McDonalds. His conceptualization is now known as the *McDonaldization of society*. Its incarnation in universities is called *McUniversities*.

Ritzer did not himself say anything entirely new. He was borrowing the ideas first expressed in 1904 by one of the great sociologists of all time, Max Weber. What Ritzer did was to show that what Weber had warned us about had already happened by the 1990s.

Weber’s groundbreaking idea was called *instrumental rationality*. This is an industrial-level response to how things are done, and it basically means calculating your actions to suit a defined end – an industrial-level effort to improve efficiency. Instrumental rationality will enhance the efficiency of achieving the goals selected by those who gave us the definitions, but it cannot achieve other goals, and might, in fact, compromise the other goals or make them unachievable.



Definitions created by people in positions of power are seldom society-focused but are, rather, self-focused. In such a scenario, there is a great danger that efficiency and instrumental rationality can take the industries away from societal goals or even towards societal peril. That, in a nutshell, is the reason for the dangers of the efficiency *mantra*. In fact, we can thank the efficiency *mantra* for virtually all the mess we are in today, locally and globally: climate change, environmental degradation, resource depletion, loss of biodiversity, unbridled consumerism, inequity, violence, and warfare and so on. All these are the unintended results of tunnel-visioned goals and narrow definitions that have ignored parts of reality (and in the case of warfare, it may not even have been unintended). They all remind us that we, having thrown the cabbage away, are now in a soup of roses.

This is not perhaps what Sir Francis Bacon had in mind when he extolled his fellow-intellectuals to utilize science in the service of man. But how could he have foreseen the arrival of the corporate industries, the stock market, the multi-national corporations, the conglomerates, and mergers and so on? How could those who nurtured universities in Bacon's time have foreseen the triple helix of universities, industries, and government?

### McDonaldization and McUniversities

Ritzer identified four characteristics in modern industry that lay behind instrumental rationality and showed how McDonalds utilized them. These are *efficiency*, *calculability*, *predictability*, and *control*. We can also see how the McUniversities have used them (see Table 2).

**Table 2: The Relationship between McDonaldization and McUniversities**

| <b>Instrumental rationality</b> | <b>McDonaldization</b>  | <b>McUniversities</b>  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Efficiency                   | Getting customers from being hungry to being full as quickly as possible. (Whether or not the food is nutritious is not important.)                     | Getting students from admission to graduation as smoothly as possible. (Whether or not the education is holistic and socially valuable is not important.)                      |
| 2. Calculability                | Measurable portion size, calories, etc. (There is no room for clients' variations or requirements.)   | Measurable course units, curricula, learning outcomes, competences, etc. (There is no room for variations in students' needs, teachers' styles or forms of knowledge.)         |
| 3. Predictability               | The products and services are the same everywhere, every day. (One "efficient" product replaces/ displaces all alternatives, and diversity is removed.) | The student experience is the same everywhere, every day. (One "efficient" experience replaces/ displaces all alternatives, and local nuances and priorities are ignored.)     |
| 4. Control                      | Humans are replaced by non-human technology. (Human contribution and innovation are eliminated.)  | Academics are replaced by computer-based learning, assessment, etc. (Academics' face-to-face contribution is eliminated, leading to a mechanistic, anti-humanistic education.) |

*Note.* Adapted from Ritzer, G. (2006). *McDonaldization: The reader* (pp. 14–17). Pine Forge Press (Sage).

The concept of McUniversities applies quite readily to the international franchised degree industry. Indeed, there is good evidence that McDonalds is far better at franchising their products than McUniversities are – the latter have been plagued by problems of ensuring consistency and quality.

But I would like to note that some of these methods have already arrived even in local state universities, through various types of programs targeting staff development, capacity-building, continuing professional development and so on. And in the COVID-19 world, we will even more readily and unquestioningly adopt more technology, however inappropriate.

If we follow on my previous arguments about efficiency, instrumental rationality, and McDonaldization and their ill effects, then we need to be cautious about accepting the strategies of McUniversities not only to the franchised degree programs in Sri Lanka, but also to the local degree programs that have adopted them here. I am not trying to say that all this is bad, any more than McDonalds is all bad. But we do need to try and identify those aspects of the fuller, more whole reality that we may be deselecting and throwing out, as we adopt these newer trends. We must ask, what is the cabbage that we are throwing out, as we enjoy the rose? And more fundamentally, as Coomaraswamy asked, what kind of work is worth doing?

Should we focus more on university education as a knowledge-based education rather than a student experience-based education? Should we think of the student more as a future citizen of this country rather than as a consumer or employee in the knowledge industries? Is there still a need to consider variations in individual students' requirements or teachers' styles or forms of knowledge – or are we to eliminate diversity for the sake of efficiency? Should we continue to try to provide some amount of useful face-to-face student-teacher encounter as a transformative strategy in education, especially under the COVID-19 new normal? Should there be an effort to transform the student as a future citizen or inspire her to reach heights not yet fathomed by her – or is teaching only about dishing out information relevant to the listed competences, to fit the student to today's counting-house and chain-belt? These are some of the questions we must ask.

### Opening up to the World

Rabindranath Tagore anticipated these events and presciently invented the perfect antidote to the McUniversities: the Shantiniketan. He advised us not to fear the world or shut ourselves in our homes. He advised us to open the windows of our dwellings so that the wind will blow in, but to ensure that we would not be blown away by it. The secret to not being blown away is to have strong roots that can withstand strong winds, to be well-rooted in our own reality and environment. We must imbibe the good that the wind brings and reject the bad it sends us.

To do this, we must know ourselves, and know to respond to changing trends on our own terms. This is the essential difference between the internationalization of higher education and the globalization of higher education that Altbach pointed out. In the former we negotiate with ideas crossing the borders on our own terms to *adapt* what is good for us,

while in the latter we have no terms of our own and simply *adopt* everything that is dished out to us.

So, let us keep asking the question, even if it is now over one-hundred-years-old: what kind of work is worth doing? To answer this, let us start by defining ourselves.

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