

# Academic Study and Working Life

Richard Ennals

## *Abstract*

*Universities face new challenges in changed economic conditions. We consider current cases of universities in Norway, Sweden, Lithuania and the UK, and identify starting points for a new approach to learning. As universities are contracted to provide short term emergency services, new questions are raised, affecting current programmes and future plans.*

**Key words:** *business, confidence, research, teaching, universities, working life*

## **Confidence and the Credibility Crunch**

It is clear that there is now a crisis of confidence in universities around Europe, regarding academic study and working life, and their possible linkage through work-based learning. This may have far-reaching implications, as governments seek to enlist universities in ongoing practical measures to address new economic challenges, while still expecting them to deliver their traditional roles in teaching and research, meeting different criteria. This “Third Task” involves universities in building and sustaining new and unfamiliar partnerships. It is perhaps not surprising to find stresses and strains. This is life in “The Credibility Crunch”.

Optimists might suggest that joining forces to meet new challenges, such as measures to counter economic crisis, could generate new energy. A new clientele could be attracted to academic study, with credit being given for prior experience of working life. A new generation of academic awards could recognise work based learning, rather than requiring study to be conventional and on the premises of academic institutions.

Others, who term themselves realists, argue that there is inherent incompatibility between the separate missions. They suggest that institutions should keep to their areas of niche expertise, and modify their internal structures to take account of separate requirements. For those engaged in leading universities through difficult times, these issues cannot be neglected.

To put some of the issues in context, we need a comparative perspective. This paper compares approaches to academic study and working life at four European universities, each in different countries, with which I have current professorial roles, dating back many years.

It may be helpful for each institution to realise that they are not alone, and that there are lessons to be learned from our similarities and differences. There is a background in terms of history and philosophy. Through ongoing collaboration we can share our learning. We do not emerge with simple solutions, to be rolled out across the four countries and beyond, but we can begin to set out some shared principles.

## **Agder University, Norway: Working Life and Innovation**

Agder University recently achieved university status, which depended on demonstrating a breadth of academic coverage, including a number of doctoral programmes. The university plays an active part in the development of the prosperous Agder region in Southern Norway, which benefits from considerable oil income. The Department of Working Life and Innovation is part of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and is led by Professor Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen, a frequent visitor to Kingston.

There has been internal and external pressure at Agder University to comply with the traditional approaches to teaching and research which have been followed by the old universities, despite the national policy emphasis on the role of new universities in supporting enterprise development and regional development. Researchers who continue programmes based on action research, dialogue, and a model of innovation based on work organisation, face challenges from economists and advocates of innovation based on diffusion of new technologies.

The report of the “National Pilot Project on Regional Development”, edited by Roger Normann (Agder Research) and Kari Josendal (of the International Research Institute in Stavanger), is to appear as a Kingston Business School Working Paper in 2009. Agder University were active participants in two successive national programmes of enterprise development (Enterprise Development 2000 and Value Creation 2010), and are currently playing a leading role in regional development (the VRI Programme, with large scale funding). Within VRI there is vigorous debate about the future direction of regional development. This has implications for teaching and learning. Kingston has hosted a series of joint research workshops, which have resulted in journal articles and special issues. There is continuing collaboration on diversity, migration, and multi-level governance.

James Karlsen’s PhD (Karlsen 2007) considered the role of the new Agder University in regional development, in terms of approaches to knowledge. He quoted the work of Peter Scott (Vice-Chancellor of Kingston University) on “The New Production of Knowledge” (Gibbons et al 1994) and “Re-Thinking Science” (Nowotny et al 2001), and of Stephen Gourlay (of Kingston Business School) on “Tacit Knowing”. The thesis explores links between academic study and the workplace, and suggests that traditional approaches have continued to dominate academia. Furthermore, evaluation of research for VRI has suggested that the impact of the university on regional development has to date been limited. Enterprises do not naturally look to the university for advice.

The new generation of Agder researchers benefited from participating in a national doctoral programme on enterprise development and working life (EDWOR), with a core methodology of action research, based at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, and delivered in intensive teaching weeks around the country and overseas. I was a visiting professor on the EDWOR programme. I continue as a visiting professor at Agder University, with the contract managed through Kingston University.

## **Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden: Skill and Technology**

The Royal Institute (KTH) is the premier university for science and technology in Sweden. The Department of Skill and Technology is part of the Faculty of Industrial Economics, and maintains close links with the professions. There is longstanding collaboration with the Royal Dramatic Theatre, with the Dialogue Seminars held since 1986, supported by an award-winning journal "Dialoger". Partners formerly included the National Institute for Working Life, which was closed in 2007. NIWL led the series of 64 international workshops "Work Life 2000: Quality in Work", for which I was rapporteur (Ennals 1999, 2000, 2001), bringing together a total of 1,000 leading international researchers.

I am working on an ongoing project on "The Swedish Model of Innovation", funded by Vinnova, with colleagues from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. The question is whether, in the current context of globalisation and global economic crisis, there is a distinctive approach to innovation in Scandinavia, which is clearly different to the Anglo-Saxon approach. Swedish optimism has been dented by the experience of Volvo and Saab, both of which had been regarded as global good practice cases of skill and human centred systems, but were sold to American automobile manufacturers Ford and General Motors, before being offered to the Swedish government as part of the current global economic crisis.

There has been strong emphasis on epistemology at KTH, and in particular on practical philosophy, which draws on both academic research and experience of working life. This was reported in the six volume "Skill and Technology" series (ed. Göranson, Springer Verlag 1988-1995), and in "Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge" (eds. Göranson, Hammarén and Ennals. Wiley 2006). The latter is the basis for an ongoing doctoral course, to which I contribute. The transition has been made from academic theory to business practice, through the Dialogue Seminar Method, which has transformed the cultures of participating organisations. Participants share their reflections on texts or cultural performances, seeking access to the tacit knowledge of the group.

There is a continuing high profile tradition of cross-disciplinary seminars, conferences and publications. Following the recent retirement of the leading researcher and impresario Professor Bo Göranson, the field is now undergoing review by the research funding bodies. A major international conference is planned for 2010, a successor to "Culture, Language and Artificial Intelligence" in May 1988.

A number of students from KTH have visited Kingston at the Masters stage of their studies, following their completed taught courses with individual dissertations. Doctoral groups have visited London for joint seminars. There was a high profile seminar series and conference at Kingston 1994-95, on "The Future of Work, Technology and Knowledge", where speakers included Professor Stephen Toulmin and David Blunkett.

## **Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania: Knowledge Economy**

Mykolas Romeris University, in Vilnius, is the third most prestigious university in Lithuania. It was formerly the Law University of Lithuania, and before that was the Police Academy. Since the end of the Cold War, and the regaining of Lithuanian independence in 1991, the country has undergone major transformation, resulting in membership of the European Union in 2004. Together with other new members of the EU, Lithuania is now facing major economic difficulties. This is proving challenging for many groups in the population, and there has been a high level of labour mobility around the EU, including to the UK.

There was a strong tradition of higher education in Lithuania, but with relatively weak links to the new market economy and Knowledge Society. However, during the transitional period, given the low salaries paid to university academics, many intellectuals also worked as consultants and interpreters in the private sector, thus gaining valuable business insights. Some key industry sectors, such as science and technology, declined after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The country needs to find niche roles in the Knowledge Economy, not least because of the lack of natural resources.

The former Dean of Public Management at Mykolas Romeris, Dr Laima Andrikiene, is an honorary graduate of Kingston. She was a leading campaigner for the return to Lithuanian independence, and served as Minister for Europe. She is now a Member of the European Parliament. Mykolas Romeris have worked with Kingston on a number of European funding bids and projects, in fields such as Lifelong Learning and Regional Development. Professor Arunas Augustinaitis is a regular research partner, for example in the Cedefop project “Learning together for local innovation: promoting learning regions” (eds. Gustavsen, Nyhan and Ennals 2007). He also contributed to the special issue of *AI & Society* “The Enlightened Workplace” (23.1.2009, which I edited).

Mykolas Romeris University is a member of the Dorich House group of European universities, hosted by Kingston University, which is developing partnerships across Europe, with a focus on teaching. It is aware of the need to modernise, and to learn from European partners. Rasa Juciute of MRU is pursuing a doctorate, with co-supervision from myself and Visiting Professor Peter Totterdill. Through Kingston, MRU are also developing collaboration with Agder University. A separate initiative linked MRU and KTH, via Kingston University and the Nordic Council. However, when financial resources are limited, MRU places increased emphasis on economic returns from efforts devoted to collaborative research bids.

## **Kingston University, UK: Corporate Responsibility and Working Life**

Kingston was accorded University status in 1992, after over a century of delivering Higher Education. It has maintained a strong reputation for teaching, and growing student numbers. It is a new university, with comprehensive cover of the disciplines. Research is gaining in strength, and there is active engagement with the local and regional economy. Kingston alumni are in management positions in organisations across the region.

Kingston Business School has built a reputation based on strong links with business and the professions, while also developing research capability, particularly in the field of Small Business Research. Many of the academic staff traditionally have come from long experience as practitioners, and courses such as the MBA have made effective use of the professional knowledge and experience of the students. Now the emphasis has switched to recruitment of “research active” academics. Kingston is expected to conform to the criteria which had been set for traditional universities, while also responding to new challenges.

As all faculties feel obliged to respond to business demands, some of the previous differences between disciplines may appear to become less pronounced. Business is a problem domain, and not a discipline in itself. However, the disciplines do not all share the same philosophy of knowledge, and joint agendas may be hard to achieve. The importance of dialogue becomes more evident, if prospective partners are to recognise that although they may use the same language, they mean different things.

Kingston University has provided a flexible and dynamic environment for teaching, research and external consultancy. My initial post in 1990 was as Head of the School of Operations Management and Quantitative Methods. My professorial chair was in Information Technology and Education, then Business Information Technology. When I stepped down as Head of School I established the Centre for Working Life Research, and my chair is now in Corporate Responsibility and Working Life. I regard corporate responsibility as a reflexive characteristic of organisations as a whole, rather than the name for a separate department.

In January 2009, in response to deepening recession, the UK government Higher Education Funding Council called for proposals for the £25m Economic Challenge Investment Fund. In April it was announced that Kingston University was successful, in a bid for £500,000, in association with Kingston College, the Royal Borough of Kingston, and Kingston Chamber of Commerce. The project is to run to September 2010, seeking to counteract problems of unemployment and economic decline.

This is a new role for Kingston University, but there had been previous peripheral involvement in 1991 when the British Aerospace factory in Kingston was closed, and there was consultation on alternative futures. I had worked with the Royal Borough of Kingston and the BAe trade unions, but without success. BAe closed and demolished the factory, using the land for luxury housing. This leaves Kingston University and Surrey County Council as the largest local employers, in a region where the engineering skill base has been weakened.

## **What is the problem?**

- How is academic study to be linked to working life?
- To what extent are the cultures separate?
- Can we simply build a bridge through work based learning?
- Alternatively, are we proposing entirely separate provision?
- How can we link the standard process of course validation with the particular needs of individual learners?
- How can we combine commercial negotiations with academic quality assurance?
- Do we now require a complex combination of skills and experience on the part of local quality assurance staff and processes?
- Can we be confident that external assessors will share our judgements?
- Would it be safer to keep to conventional approaches to course design and validation?
- What are the consequences of such a decision, in terms of opportunity cost?
- To what extent should universities allow themselves to be driven by the demands of governments and business?

## **Is there a solution?**

Each of the four universities has a distinctive history. I suggest that each is now encountering a version of the same problem, which derives from the history of ideas and the philosophy of knowledge. The globalisation of the international economy means that we are connected, and interdependent, as never before.

Research in Business Schools does not appear to have predicted, or prepared us for, the current “Credit Crunch” and “Global Economic Crisis”. Researchers appear to have assumed, together with bankers and regulators, that market forces provided self-correcting mechanisms. They neglected widely reported insights from Nobel Laureates such as Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, who presented the workings of the market in different terms, and Mohamad Yunus, who redefined the practical nature of markets.

How can we explain the problem? As Stephen Toulmin (Kingston Visiting Professor) reminded us in “Return to Reason” (Harvard 2001), we have a common legacy of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which laid down the borders of European nation states. There was a similar pressure to stabilise intellectual life, with the founding of the major scientific disciplines and institutional structures.

In recent years, this settlement has unravelled. Both stability (derived from physics) and equilibrium (derived from economics) have been shown to be myths. The reality is, and always has been, chaos and uncertainty. This raises fundamental questions for social science, whose claims for objectivity and detachment have been undermined. Toulmin recommends adoption of the model of clinical intervention, from health and social care sciences.

There are undoubted attractions in the positivist approach to social science research. Appeals to scientific certainty (“physics envy”) can be reassuring. Quantitative analysis seems less complicated and ambiguous. Accordingly, positivism has retained power both in research and in the assessment of research, while scepticism has increased as to whether the emperor has

any clothes. It has been seen as wisest to commend the tailor, and to appear to emulate the design. In short, business, and Business Schools, strive to continue as usual.

We can emerge from these contradictions, either in Denial, or suffering frustration. The critique of positivist social science is being vindicated, yet leaders of academic institutions lack the confidence to know what to do next. In many cases they are tied to funding mechanisms which reflect the very world view which is now discredited. They link to hierarchies of top-down management, which have commodified knowledge, deskilled teaching and emasculated research, and deploy judgements which do not derive from experience of engagement.

A complicating factor may come from the appointment of new tiers of managers of the education process, who are drawn from other professions, rather than from teaching. The assumption is that Education, including Business Education, is a business like any other, and needs to become more business-like. To take this approach at a time when business appears to have imploded could be regarded as foolhardy.

## **Networking**

In each of the four universities there has been a recognition of the importance of networking. Much can be learned by working in partnership on joint projects.

*Agder University (Norway)* has been active in national and regional programmes of enterprise development, and is now seeking to build international profile. Agder lead a joint proposal with Kingston and MRU, for a workshop at a conference on diversity and migration, in Copenhagen in September 2009. They are bidding to lead a new doctoral programme.

*The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) (Sweden)* have built national and international networks, concentrating on Dialogue, and crossing national and disciplinary borders. They are now preparing for a conference in 2010.

*Mykolas Romeris University (MRU) (Lithuania)* have regarded the European Union as a learning environment. They have raised their performance in research and economic development through engagement in Integrated Projects, Networks of Excellence, and research workshops on particular topics. They are now experienced European players.

*Kingston Business School (UK)* has been engaging in networking through the Centre for Working Life Research and the UK Work Organisation Network, which brings together employers organisations, trade unions, universities, research organisations, and government departments as observers. Kingston is represented on the UKWON Board by Professor David Miles, Visiting Professor Peter Totterdill, Visiting Fellow Campbell Ford, and myself. Internationally UKWON is linked with other national networks, many European networks and projects, and with Agder University, KTH and MRU. Research at Kingston Business School has been more traditional and individualist, while the Small Business Research Centre has built a national and international reputation.

Networking, and learning from differences, can be a powerful approach to learning in itself. Action Research involves a process of learning. Publications, such as this paper, can be regarded as interventions, or actions.

## **Towards a New Pedagogy and Philosophy of Knowledge**

There has been considerable effort to address the common challenges, including in the four universities discussed above. This does not mean that we have a ready-made alternative to be rolled out, but we can identify sound principles.

Clarity is needed regarding “skill”, “skills” and “competence”. All too often the terms are used interchangeably, leading to confusion (Ennals 1988 in eds Göranson and Josefson)..

- **Competence** is something observable, which the worker can be seen to perform. National Vocational Qualifications are comprised of competences, assessed and required.
- **Skill** requires reflection, the awareness of alternatives, and engagement in professional discourse.
- **Skills** tend to denote literacy, numeracy and IT familiarity, deemed to be essential background for particular tasks. They are noted by their absence, and frequently identified as policy priorities.

When we hear senior managers talking about taking a “business-facing approach”, and addressing the “Skills Agenda”, what is meant may be less than clear.

It is important to reflect on cultures of management and government.

- Are the agendas for development of particular professional areas being set by those with practitioner experience? Alternatively, is there a separate group of advisers, possibly based in think tanks or management consultancies, who are contracted to undertake this task? What is the basis of their “knowledge”?
- We know that senior positions in banks were given to people without professional experience. Is the same happening in Education, which we could regard as Knowledge Banks? Alternatively, should we regard engaged practitioners as producers, with vested interests, to be treated with caution?

## **Assessing and Accrediting Prior Experience, Competence and Learning**

It turns out, from a number of research projects since the 1980s, that assessing and accrediting prior experience, competence and learning is not straightforward (Göranson and Josefson 1988). It involves entering into dialogue within the professional domain, and evaluating the extent to which the applicant is a member of the community of practice. This implies that the assessment is conducted by an expert. It can sound simple enough to agree a “Learning Contract”, until one addresses how “evidence” is to be provided for a third party or quality assurance body, who may themselves not be engaged in that professional domain.

If the purpose of the APEL was to ease entry into university courses with advanced standing, then it can be successful if the subsequent work meets the academic standards. If, however, the proposal is to replace conventional academic study by a Learning Contract dealing with work based learning, derived from employment, controversy is likely to continue.

## **Quality Circles and Student Quality Circles**

In principle, the language of Quality is neutral. In practice, it is closely linked to prevailing power relationships.

Ishikawa introduced “Quality Circles” into Japanese industry in 1960, to enable the workers to own the quality of their work, and collaborate on continuous improvement. He was concerned to restore respect for craftsmanship, and to develop a collaborative approach to craftsmanship.

The approach was observed by Indian educationalists in 1992, and adapted for schools use as “Student Quality Circles”. Students are empowered to direct their own learning, with facilitation and a set of tools. Internationally, collaboration is supported by the World Council for Total Quality and Excellence in Education. I am vice chairman.

A recent article (Haga and Ennals 2009) compared experience of using Quality tools in Norway and Pakistan. It found, in each case, that the development of a common language and set of common tools and techniques could underpin collaboration. What is then required is “network orchestration”, in a context of shared ownership.

In the UK, by contrast, Quality tends to have been imposed top down, as an instrument of management control. In order to economise, Quality has typically been reduced to an exercise of ticking boxes to meet external requirements. Quality is thus rarely locally owned, and may become part of a culture of compliance.

Each organisation could usefully reflect on the model of Quality which they have introduced. In separate recent internal papers I have argued the case for introducing Student Quality Circles at Kingston University, recalling that we are a learning community, rather than a teaching factory. The link to Quality Circles in industry would be more powerful if the Quality Movement in the UK had not disintegrated in recent years. As we move into a Knowledge Society and Knowledge Economy, the time may be right to rebuild.

## **Conclusion**

In a changing world, where economic assumptions have proved to be unfounded, we cannot rely on textbooks which are now in print. What are we to teach our students? What are we to say to business partners and clients? Traditional orthodoxies may not be defensible. We have much to learn from our students, including through reverse intergenerational learning (Baily 2009). We must resist calls for quick fixes, while at the same time retaining proper scepticism regarding conventional academic disciplines. We can work together, learning from encounters, and from differences.