

Burton C Clark lecture 2022

Sagas of Contemporary Higher Education: Foreground and Hinterland

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A simple (naive) question

- The dominant saga of contemporary higher education places it firmly in the context of its relationship to political economy. Is it possible to tell a different story about higher education, to think about it in a different way?

Plan of lecture

1. To explore the idea of sagas (following Clark - but extending to systems not just institutions)
2. To analyse the dominant saga, the location of higher education in the context of political economy
3. To discuss whether there is room for an alternative saga - and what its main features might be

Sagas - and Burton Clark

The Organisational Saga of Higher Education
(1972) - a study of three liberal arts colleges

Two core elements of sagas:

- FOREGROUND: Rational stories embodied in structures, organisations, careers...
- HINTERLAND: Non-structural elements, beliefs and loyalties, imaginaries... [instinctive, internalised - not just 'out-in-the-open' ideology]

Dominant saga: 'foreground'

- Mass higher education & political economy
- Entering (more decisively) into 'social space'...
 - Increasing cost >>> funding, fees, income generation, knowledge businesses...
 - Fixing life-styles / life-chances, (graduate) 'cosmopolitans' v (left-behind) 'populists'
 - Shaping the economy - research & skills ('knowledge economy')
- Effect nor affect: inevitable outcome of mass expansion

Successive ‘hinterlands’

- Higher education & the Welfare State: expansion and social reform / ‘progress’
- Higher education & the ‘market’: knowledge goods & services, neoliberalism

BUT both in overarching context of HE and political economy - not Welfare State Arcadia v Neoliberal Dystopia

HE & political economy

<i>Foreground</i>	Mass higher education	Market' higher education
<i>Hinterland</i>	Welfare State, social reform	Regulatory State, Neoliberal economics

Enter the ‘market’

Social space to transactional spaces

- Production of skilled graduates / ‘entrepreneurial aura’
- Value-for-money (institutions), rates-of-return (individuals)
- Research impact: universities as ‘knowledge factories’

New systems & practices

- Contractual relations between universities & funders (State, students...)
- New forms of governance (corporatisation) and management ('managerialism')
- The metrics revolution: 'success' & 'satisfaction'
- Rankings: exciting competition, policing performance

An alternative saga?

Two questions:

- Foreground: Can 'iron link' between HE & political economy be broken?
- Hinterland: Can market / transactional relations be replaced (qualified?) by more human / democratic relations?

Shifts in political economy

- Post-Covid exhaustion of ‘small-state’ / deregulation model?
- Reversing inequality trend (‘left-behind’, ‘levelling-up’...)
- Renewed emphasis on human rights (BLM, Ukraine...)
- Growth of ‘ecological conscience’

Elements of a new saga

1. Putting 'education' back into higher education -
in place of skills, rates-of-return...
2. Promoting a democratic revival -
 - organisationally (management)
 - politically (governance)
 - educationally (new curriculum)