

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY: DISCOURSE ANALYSES OF UNIVERSITY MISSION STATEMENTS

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes and compares four Mission Statements issued by the University of Alberta (Canada), Monash University (Australia), University of Bucharest (Romania), and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Hong Kong). The epistemological foundation for the discussion is constructionist, as I first attempt to integrate the four mission statements within the synchronic taxonomy identified in Scott (2006), by probing grammatical and lexical evidence for complementary meanings. The philosophical stance resonates with Heidegger's temporal phenomenology of the authentic Being in interrelation with Becoming, with a focus on the "primordial way of understanding" (Gibbs, 2010) as well as on Derrida's view on the "university responsibility" (Derrida, 2004). The theoretical perspective also draws on Barnett's concept of "understanding" as the "intentional space of the university", which "can begin to offer a way forward in a university's self-reflections" (Barnett, 2011). Using the discourse analyses of the four Mission Statements as well as linguistic evidence, this discussion will compare their audience and rhetoric to accurately integrate these universities along the metaphysical – ecological spectrum.*

Keywords: *mission, vision, being and becoming, ecological university, authenticity, responsibility.*

We live in a world where the foundation of a new law (droit) – in particular a new university law – is necessary. To call it necessary is to say in this case at one and the same time that one has to take responsibility for it, a new kind of responsibility, and that this foundation is already well on the way, and irresistibly so.

Jacques Derrida (2004)

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The epistemological foundation for my discussion is constructionist, as I first attempt to integrate four existing mission statements within the synchronic taxonomy identified in Scott (2006), by probing grammatical and lexical evidence for complementary meanings. The philosophical stance resonates with Heidegger's temporal phenomenology of the authentic *Being* in interrelation with *Becoming*, with a focus on the "primordial way of understanding" (Gibbs, 2006) as well as on Derrida's view on the "university

responsibility" (Derrida, 2004). Also, the theoretical perspective draws on Barnett's concept of "understanding" as the "intentional space of the university", which "can begin to offer a way forward in a university's self-reflections" (Barnett, 2011).

Within this framework, I compare the four Mission Statements against the dimensions of *being* and *becoming* and identify features which will allow the classification of the universities under the categories of metaphysical – scientific – entrepreneurial – bureaucratic university, on the one hand, and/or the liquid – therapeutic – authentic -

ecological university, on the other. This study is an invitation to dialogue among the four universities, each with its specific instructional and communication foci, and research directions. I will thus profile the audience of the Mission Statements, discuss their rhetoric, and establish correlations between the authentic *self* and circumstantial *self* of each university (Barnett, 2011). I will draw on Ilie's reference to institutional discourse (in Garzone and Ilie, 2007), and I will use discourse analysis as methodology (Fairclough, 2003) and linguistic analysis as the principal method of investigation. The focus of the linguistic analysis will be on grammatical and lexical features (i.e., verbal forms and tenses, and lexico-semantics, respectively) identified in the written discourse of the Mission Statements.

2. DISCOURSE ANALYSES: MISSION STATEMENTS

Following Scott's taxonomy (2006), this paper observes that, in its Mission Statement, the University of Alberta¹ has defined for itself a multilayered mission pertaining to applied research (locally, nationally and internationally) as well as to community-oriented projects; in this context, Canada is viewed as a global leader in innovation ("placing Canada at the global forefront"), and the university is orienting its efforts to democratization ("the whole people"). The Mission Statement encompasses the public service aspect when it states its commitment to community involvement and when it considers citizenship as one of its foundational concepts. Its internationalization goal is attained by giving an "international voice to innovation". Monash University's Mission Statement² also reflects willingness to serve its community, in both local and multi-cultural settings ("committed to the provision of the following high quality services and their continuous improvement across the various campuses of

Monash University. [...] bearing in mind the multi-cultural location and the wider Monash University Community.") The Hong Kong University pledges to "promote and assist in the economic and social development of Hong Kong [...] and to enrich Hong Kong's culture."

In profiling the audience for which these Mission Statements are intended, I identify a balanced approach, to satisfy both internal and external readers alike, i.e., current faculty ("already in place"); students at various stages: prospective ("outstanding students from Alberta, Canada, and the world"), undergraduate ("engage students through mentorship and peer-based activities such as clubs, ..."), graduate ("outstanding graduate students"), and post-graduate ("fellows, researchers"); and partners ("good stewardship of financial resources"). When mentioning "all Monash staff and students," the Mission Statement addresses academic and non-academic audiences alike, and, by aiming at potential students, it reminds of Barnett's note on university's entrepreneurial elements. Hong Kong University also includes references to "all students, undergraduate and postgraduate," who are considered "community leaders and lifelong learners" as well as "faculty" and "visiting scholars."³

The analysis seeks evidence in the Mission Statements' texts of the universities' authentic *self*, i.e., a *self* that is reflecting, deliberating, and "projecting on possibilities" (Gibbs, 2010). Thus, on the one hand, by appealing to linguistic devices (namely, the grammatical category of 'tense' for the verbs used and the lexical choices made in the Mission Statements), the University of Alberta defines itself as a research university at a dynamic entrepreneurial stage in its development, as well as an institution which strives to encompass the attributes of the intentional university (Barnett, 2011). Overall, its mission delineates a *becoming* university, which provides space for "academic travel" and "free spirits" (Barnett, 2011), while at the same time sharing multiple features with the therapeutic, authentic and ecological university. Moreover,

¹http://www.president.ualberta.ca/~media/University%20of%20Alberta/Administration/Office%20of%20the%20President/Documents/D2D/D2D_Vision_Document_2009c.pdf

² <http://monash.edu/about/who/ambition.html>

³ http://www.ust.hk/eng/about/mission_vision.htm

when analyzing the statements issued by Monash University, phrasing such as “continuous improvement” refers to ecological features, “across the various campuses” (i.e., within the frame of the university). Hong Kong University, too, reflects the continuity and fluidity of communication among its faculty and staff who “may continually develop intellectually and professionally.”

2.1 Linguistic evidence: Verbal forms and tenses. Similar to other mission statements of North American universities⁴, the finite verbs (e.g., “discovers”) used in the University of Alberta’s Mission Statement are mostly in the simple present, a tense referring to actions of universal character, general truths, widely accepted rules or scientific knowledge, or simply actions that occur with regularity. I argue that simple present tense suggests the *being* of the university (Barnett, 2011); by employing the simple present tense, the writers have anchored the university’s mission in the current reality, using actions which occur with reliable frequency. Numerous verbs used in the Mission Statement issued by Monash University position the institution in the frame of *being* as well: “provides,” “has regard for,” “recognizes and values,” “creates,” “offers,” “achieves,” “supports and contributes.” A remarkable case is the University of Bucharest, whose Mission Statement relies of numerous defining constructions. This preoccupation with terms of recognition, of affirming the status quo, illustrate the necessity of presenting itself as a reliable institution. Confirming its credibility are expressions such as “The University of Bucharest [...] enjoys a considerable national and international prestige” or “Its graduates have included many prominent personalities: teachers and researchers at important universities all over the world.” This feature positions the University of Bucharest in a “point of reference” and therefore in the *being*

state, for a university needs to *be* first in order to *become*. The Hong Kong University development also corresponds to the *being* stage: “*to be* a leading institution for research.”

In contrast, the University of Alberta’s Vision makes repeated use of non-finite verbal forms, such as the infinitive (e.g., “to discover”) or the present participle (e.g., “discovering”), which may suggest more the *becoming* of the university (Barnett, 2011), a feature with a less definite time frame, where the infinitive is associated with future or projected actions or intentions, while the present participle may define methods by which important actions are to be accomplished. At the same time, the University of Bucharest’s Mission Statement seems to alternate between *being* and *becoming*. By identifying itself as “the initiator of a set of major measures [...] successfully adopted by other universities in the country, this Mission Statement suggests elements of a *becoming* university, with characteristics of the liquid university when focusing on “reform and development.”

Another relevant use of the simple present tense lies with the 35 action verbs positioned at the beginning of each goal in the Missions Statements of the University of Alberta and Monash University, and 30 infinitives of purpose found in the University of Bucharest’s and Hong Kong’s university’s statements. In the case of the University of Alberta, on the one hand, the plural subjects for each of the four categories/”cornerstones” allow for an ambivalent reading of these verb forms: both in simple present, indicative mode, and the imperative mode. On the other hand, the *all caps* highlighting applied to the first word (i.e., the verb) in each statement contributes to the more effective skimming of the Mission Statement. Both these strategies (i.e., ambivalent reading of verbs and *all caps*) aim at rendering an engaging context, from which each statement arises; these actions support the *becoming* of the university. Thus, they reflect its current conditions (“improve” as in the therapeutic university), support its authenticity (“making itself intelligible to the world” (Barnett, 2011), emphasize its developments (“enhance”, “foster”), and point to its changing

⁴University of Toronto: <http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/about/mission.htm>

University of Michigan: <http://www.umich.edu/pres/mission.php>

University of Prince Edward Island: <http://friends.upei.ca/support/forourdonors/missionstatement>

nature in real time, articulating the features of the “open-ended”, *ecological university* (“improve”, “recruit”, and “build”). The simple present verbs in the Mission Statement from Monash University points largely towards the *being* of the university (“provides,” “has regard for,” “recognizes and values,” “creates,” “offers,” “achieves,” “supports,” and “contributes.” Also relevant for this state (*being*) are the infinitives found in the University of Bucharest’s and Hong Kong University’s Mission Statements: “to attain and maintain”, “to prepare”, “to conduct”, “to ensure”, “to apply”, “to contribute”, or “to play a key role.”

2.2 Linguistic evidence: Lexicosemantics.

The University of Alberta’s focus is first on the local community and self-growth; five initial goals suggesting activities intended for internal development (Cf. the developmental and authentic features identified by Barnett, 2011): “attract” (2), “recruit” (2), and “improve access” (1). To counterbalance this direction, the sections using openers such as “create”, “enhance”, “engage”, and “foster” refer to wider, intercultural, inter-disciplinary, and more universal contexts (Cf. Barnett’s ecological characteristics (2011)): “enhance a global perspective”, “enhancing cross-disciplinary initiatives”, “connecting to communities around the world”, “translating and disseminating our research outcomes”, “address global challenges and initiatives that foster mutual understanding, global peace...”. Furthermore, by including in its Mission Statement verbs such as “to look for solutions,” “to imagine alternatives,” “to become ready,” “to continuously enhance,” “to create institutional coherence,” “to perfect training,” or “to adjust, the University of Bucharest situates itself in a *becoming* position, ready to experiment further with this approach.

Another example, this time of a therapeutic description, can be recognized in the last item of the third ‘cornerstone,’ which states the University of Alberta’s goal to integrate the local external communities. As a result of its universal (authentic) trait, the university will not only “serve” but also “draw strength from the diversity of our external communities, in

particular aboriginal, Franco-Albertan, multicultural, rural, and northern communities.” Entrepreneurial attributes are also articulated through phrasing and word choices such as “needs-based and merit-based financial assistance”, “increase affordability”, “offer competitive fellowships”, “invest in world-class teaching”, and show “good stewardship of financial resources and capital assets”, and can be recognizable in the University of Bucharest as well: “to promote the image.”

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Mission Statements published by the University of Alberta, University of Bucharest, Monash University, and Hong Kong University comprise a complex array of goals. These goals are presented in a dynamic, realistic, and integrated discourse, which echoes Barnett’s notion of “*feasible utopias*”. In an attempt to cover as much ground as possible, these Mission Statements ensure that no defining and relevant characteristic is left unmentioned: the vibrant energy when balancing between internal and external communities, the constant attempt at global alignment in research and communication, the permanent awareness of the need for resources, the intricate relationships among the people involved, and their continuous engagement with learning, imagination, and citizenship. Overall, modeling the sample analyses of these four Mission Statements, I will continue to search for more specific correlations between various other university Mission Statements worldwide, currently available, their discourse, and the theoretical framework outlining the characteristics of the ecological university.

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