

# The digital revolution: can the university survive? Yes and no!

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# Themes of this conference

- Transformation of
  - Universities as institutions
  - Teaching
  - Student learning/ student experience
  - The 'classroom'
- Concerns about technology – reliability, trust, transparency.

# My approach

- Standing back
- Overview
- Argument – a thesis
- Theoretical? - but nothing so practical as a good theory
- I shall tread on some toes – but fairly gently
- I also want to offer a vision, even a utopian vision.

# The conference question

- *‘How can universities reinvent themselves in order to cope with the societal impact of digital transformation?’*
- Note ‘societal’ – just what is the societal impact – or societal impacts
- I’ll offer my own thoughts here
- But 2 further questions:
  - What is the relationship between (a) the emergence of the digital era in society on the one hand and (b) the coming of the digital university?
    - NB: (b) doesn’t follow from (a)!
  - What are the societal possibilities for the digitised university?

# My thesis

- The emergence of the digital era is real
  - And is having profound impact upon the university
  - Not only on materials, technologies, modes of inquiry and learning
- Responses: bleakness and optimism
- Profound bleak possibility
  - Perhaps the university is becoming a *thought-free zone*?
- But the digital age is opening quite new possibilities for the univ
- Both in its internal affairs and in its engagement with society
- There is much to play for.

# Two opposed camps:

## 1 – the proselitizers

- Governments/ cross-national agencies/ institutional leaders/ think tanks
- Of course, the digital revolution has to be embraced
- And with enthusiasm
- It can transform learning, teaching, the student experience
- Who could not be in favour of it?
- Those who raise critical questions are dinosaurs
- Who are being left behind
- and are on the wrong side of history
- Let us just get on with the revolution.

## 2 The naysayers

- Different positions
- The digital revolution
- Is a mirage – always with us
- Isn't coming – the university today is much as it was in the 11<sup>th</sup> century
- Isn't wanted even by students – lecture halls are still full
- Is pernicious

# Just an example – learning analytics

## The proselytizers:

- Reducing attrition rates
- Improving efficiency
- Make possible the digital university
- Reducing recurrent and overhead costs
- Monitoring students

# Learning analytics – the naysayers

- Monitoring students!
- Lack of consultation
- Unethical
- Manipulation – both by management and by the students themselves
- Damages the pedagogical relationship (akin to the doctor-patient relationship being monitored)
- An example of ‘new public management’
- And instrumental reason

# A plague on both your houses

- Neither group has it right
- & neither group is to be trusted
- & both have limited agendas
  
- (However, perhaps the naysayers listen to the proselytizers
- And critique them
- But the proselytizers seldom address their critics?)

# Where's the idea of the university?

## ***Both – proselytizers and naysayers - work within narrow frameworks***

- *The proselytizers* – little critical reflection:
  - ‘Are there disbenefits here?’
    - Question isn't asked
  - Little consideration of ‘the idea of the university’
- *The naysayers*:
  - Look back to a golden age that never was
  - Fail to consider its (new) possibilities and responsibilities in the C21
  - We all need to keep revisiting the question:
    - what is a university – and what is it and what should it be in the C21?

# The university in a digital age

- In the digital age, the university is connected/ networked with the world
  - Whether it understands this or not
- And the world itself is inter-connected
  - School children in India, China and Africa are connected with the world
- What is the university's response?
  - This matter is not seriously being addressed
- For 900 years, the university occupied a definite place – a building
  - Now it is (in) a global space
- What are its new possibilities in this situation?
  - What are the university's *responsibilities*?

# The global and networked university

- **Examples of possible developments/ possibilities**
- *Research and scholarship:*
  - International cooperation (and more mutual understanding)
  - New ecologies of inquiry – networks spanning academic/ corporate/ political spheres as well as West/East and North/South
- *Teaching and learning*
  - Cross-national classrooms
  - The ‘flipped classroom’
- *Outreach*
  - Global conversations (Prof Michael Sandel – ‘The Public Philosopher’)
  - Research data available on-line

# A world of alternative facts and cyber manipulation

- Human understanding is not freely developed
- Especially from the 1930s
- But now, the digital age brings new powers of cognitive manipulation
  - (Many examples, not only in USA and the UK)
- So the university now has new responsibilities
- But also new possibilities – of reaching out to the world
- The university – interests in learning, understanding, inquiry
  - Now those interests can be shared with the world.

# The university and the public sphere

- The idea of the public sphere
- Crucial to a democracy
- Now threatened – discourses and debate narrows/ closes
- The digital age – new responsibility on the university
- To play its part in widening the public sphere
  - And developing public understanding of issues
  - And increasing the flow of ideas
    - And the growth of critical thought
- Sandel/ university without walls/ citizen scientists/ Harvard & Oxford etc/ academics' blogs/ internet collectives/ ...

# The idea of the university - again

- In the digital age, the idea of the university has to be rethought – again
- Nothing less
- Difficult, not easy
- Requires imagination, even a utopian imagination
  - & a critical understanding of the world
- The university can fulfil its traditional functions but in totally new ways
- Problem: requires independence but universities now incorporated into political agendas.
- So just at the moment new possibilities open, the space for the university is diminished. (Witness many countries of the world.)

# Leadership in a digital age

## *Requires:*

- A programme of continuous and deep learning – do Rectors read?
- Imagination
- Concern for the university
- But also the world
- And the university in the (digital) world
- Vision – and even utopian thinking
- A global ethics
- Capacities not just for action
- But also for working with all to help institutional understandings of (a) challenges; (b) responsibilities; (c ) possibilities

## Conclusion ‘The digital university: can the university survive? Yes and no!’

- The university is on a cusp
  - It is not – as some say – in ruins.
  - But it is at a critical junction
  - Does it succumb to the digital age uncritically?
  - Or does it seek seriously to understand the world
  - And *fearlessly* work out its responsibilities and its possibilities.
  - Yes, the university can survive
- but it requires a quite new understanding of leadership
- Which comprehends the difficulties
  - - and imaginatively glimpses possibilities



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