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# What should a university be known for?

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Centre for Higher  
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# A fundamental challenge

- What is a university in the C21? What should it be?
- What should it be known for?
- We have no idea of substance.
- How derive one?
- We need to understand the world
- But also be clear about the values that any such idea might further.

# Ten opening considerations

- A 'post-truth' world – with 'alternative facts'
- A globalised world - & higher education itself a global enterprise (26,000/ 200)
- World rankings and competition
- Emergence of private sphere of higher education and universities (HE markets)
- Possibly *down*valuing of higher education (students/ families/ employers)
- Social schisms (exemplified in 'Brexit')
- Distrust of experts
- Loss of academic autonomy
- Rise of nationalism & downvaluing of internationalisation
- Emergence of 'the snowflake generation'(?).

# Reflections

- An unstable and fluid world – no going back to Newman or a ‘golden age’ (the 1960s (?))
- A fuzzy world
- Emergence of ‘cognitive capital’ but
- Many functions of the university are now replicated across society
- Ever greater intervention by the state in higher education and universities
  - eg teacher education (would-be students are bewildered by the options)
- Aspects of closure – universities’ action apparently constrained (audit etc)
- (Much academic work here is pessimistic and ‘hopelessly impoverished’)
- But also openness – new spaces

# What is a university known for?

- Formation of skills – mantra of ‘skills, skills, skills’ (‘Teaching’)
  - Knowledge creation aligned to industry (‘Research’)
  - Engagement with industry (3<sup>rd</sup> mission)
- 
- Disinterested understandings of matters
  - Support for public sector (medicine, school teaching, social work)
- 
- **BUT** in a large portion of society, the university isn’t known for anything at all.

# Ideas of the university

- 1 Trivialisation – ‘excellence’/ ‘world-class’/ ‘delivery systems’ (superficial)
- 2 ‘The entrepreneurial university’ – goes with the flow (an endorsement philosophy).
  - the dominant idea in public policy
  - unduly limited to the university’s economic role.
- 3 Visionary & superficial – ‘the digital university’/ ‘the edgeless university’
  - the ‘flipped classroom’/ ‘learning analytics’ ...

# Limited horizons

- Our current ideas of the university are hopelessly inadequate
- Limited horizons:
  - Economy
  - Digitalisation
  - Pessimism

# What is short supply

We lack worked out ideas of the university that are

- visionary,
- deep
- critical and
- feasible.

There are ideas of

- 'the virtuous university'
  - 'the university of wisdom'
  - the 'sustainable university' and
  - the 'public' university
- but these *thin* ideas – and they have a castles-in-the-air quality.

# Glimpsing the ecological university

- The university is encircled by 7 ecosystems:
  - The economy
  - Knowledge
  - Social institutions
  - The individual
  - Learning
  - Culture
  - The natural environment

These 7 ecosystems have flowed into the university with new intensities.

# Becoming an ecological university

- The ecological university is not just influenced by its 7 ecosystems
- It is not even just aware of these 7 ecosystems
- But rather plays its part in advancing each of the 7 ecosystems

*So, it follows that:*

- Each university – in being ‘ecological’ – will discern/ imagine possibilities for itself in and across the 7 ecosystems
- And across all of its activities – teaching/ the student experience/ research/ scholarship/ engagement with the wider society.
- It will form its own ‘ecological profile’
- And will keep this profile under review and on the move.

# Spaciousness and connectedness

In this idea/ vision of the university, there is:

- Spaciousness – even infinite space
- Fluidity
- Care and concern for the university's total environment – for persons; for the world; for the whole Earth
- And 'relationality' – a heightening of the university's connectedness ...
- Hope
- Faith in the university

## Conclusions

- We are woefully short of an idea – and a philosophy  
– for the university in the C21
- We need ideas that have large horizons
  - And that are optimistic, looking for possibilities & even visionary
- But realistic, aware of the complex and even hostile  
environment (in which the university moves)
- The idea of the ecological university is a ‘feasible utopia’
- It is already present to some degree – and will become  
more so only thro hard work on all levels by each university.
- This is a universal idea but it calls also for each university  
to become itself.
- Let’s get cracking!



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