Towards a Social Contract for Higher Education: Glimpsing the Ecological University

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The problem stated

- 20,000 ‘universities’; 200 million students - 12 million of whom are international
- States investing in their higher education systems (across world)
- Investment in science and technology (STEM)
- & new ideas of higher education emerging (digitally-based).

**But:**
- No clear sense of the relationship of HEIs to society
- Much talk of ‘the global economy’, ‘enterprise’, ‘high skills’
- But a sense that this economic agenda is insufficient.
- What then?
- How move forward and establish a new basis for HEIs and society in the C21?
Straws in the wind

- ‘The public good’/ ‘public goods’
- ‘The sustainable university’
- UN Sustainable Development Goals
- ‘The co-operative university’
- ‘The healthy university’
- Theme of ‘hope’ (South Africa)
- University of wisdom (Nick Maxwell).
A reckoning

3 directions of travel in those progressive ideas:

• Society; The planet; Personal wellbeing.

• Multiplicity of new directions & growth.
• & Higher education/ universities now seen as a source of ‘soft power’

• So all is well?
Contending forces

7 huge phenomena pressing in other directions:

1. ‘Cognitive capitalism’ (power of corporations; end of humanities)
2. The digital age (e.g., learning analytics; surveillance in universities)
3. Global competition of the brain – higher education a geo-political matter
   • And now concerns over the Global North/Global South divide
4. ‘New public management’ – has reached its limits?
5. Social class reasserting itself (diminishing prospects for social mobility)
6. Divided societies: those who have experienced higher education and those who have not. (e.g., Brexit)
7. Fake news/‘post-truth’ age (who can we trust?).
The state of play in HEIs: a bleak picture

• Asked to do more and more with less and less
• Tighter audit regimes
• Tighter monitoring of staff
• Lowering morale
• Separation of leaders from staff
• Tension between academics & administrators (‘3rd space’ professionals)
• Ever higher bars to get over (what is it to have a paper published in ‘world-leading journal’)
• An empty vocabulary – ‘excellence’, ‘world-class’, ‘skills’
• Diminishing autonomy & creativity.
The public and political perceptions of HEIs

- Mistrust
- Not sufficiently attuned to the problems of society
- Enjoying a relatively easy life – compared to other public services, including school education/ further & technical education
- Hostile to the dominant currents of the age (sites of social radicalism)
- And, worst of all, curtailing ‘academic freedom’
  - Extraordinary situation of governments insisting on ‘academic freedom’
- So tensions around the world – USA, China/ Hong Kong, Australia, UK, Chile, Turkey, Middle East …
The higher education ‘debate’

• University leaders reluctant to speak out
• But they are highly sensitive to what is being said
• When they do respond, 3 responses:
  • Their universities are already much socially engaged (it’s just largely unnoticed)
  • They put to work demonstrating their existing social contribution, pointing to concrete examples of their ‘civic’/ ‘global’/ ‘environmental’ outreach
  • They pick up on a major idea – eg UN’s Sustainability Development Goals – and actively work to shape their portfolio of activities in that light.
And the students?

- Much satisfaction
- But also much anxiety (not new) – personal/ social challenges of transition enhanced by the digital world
- But a new anxiety – the future (theirs and the planet’s) – their degree matters more than ever; but the planet matters even more.
- Socially/civically concerned
- Subject to surveillance (learning analytics)
- Focus on their ‘skills’ – but what of their humanity?
- NB: international students often face particular difficulties.
And the (academic) staff?

- Under continuous pressures
- Now: researcher, writer, teacher, programme designer, student counsellor, publicity agent and market entrepreneur (for ‘impact’)
- Precariat
- Constant surveillance (‘performance management’)
- But: despite huge pressure, by-and-large continuing sense of satisfaction along with low morale. (‘I like my work but it’s all too much’).
So: a summary

The state *(towards their universities)*:
- Mistrust & scepticism
- Problems rather than solutions
- Non-aligned
- Ideologically adrift
- Privileged

HEIs *(towards their state and situation)*:
- Beleagured & struggling
- Diminishing autonomy
- Ever-rising and unsatisfiable expections
- Dancing on egg-shells (what will happen next?)
- Experimentation – but ad hoc (not least given the exigencies of a university’s situation).
This is a dialogue of the deaf

- We have a dialogue of the deaf
- The warring parties (state/ universities/ peoples/ management/ students/ academics/ administrators/ big business) talk past each other
  - Separate agendas
  - Separate interests
  - Separate languages
  - Separate ideologies
Total incomprehension

- More or less total incomprehension
- Total incoherence
- No common framework
- No basis on which a conversation can even be built.
  - (And there are no translators, interlocutors or counsellors who can bring the parties together, with their mutual mistrust of each other).

The big question: (how) can this situation be repaired?
The idea of a social contract

• (Are there any lawyers in the house?!)
• The UK’s 1997 *Inquiry into Higher Education* (the ‘Dearing Report’)
• Urged a social ‘compact’ between higher education and the government
• Problem: ‘compact’ is a somewhat informal understanding between parties
• We need something more formal – a *contract*.
• What could it look like here?
An ecological perspective

- **7 ecosystems (zones) of the university:**
  - Economy
  - Knowledge
  - Learning
  - Social institutions
  - Culture
  - Persons
  - The natural environment

**Reminder:** Ecologies are usually impaired (by human hand) but can be repaired (by human hand).
The university – & its ecosystems
Possibilities
(which vary in range and depth and ethical aspects)

Knowledge
• Putting academic work on-line
• Offering pro-bono advice

Economy
• Community engagement to realise public goods of value to society
• Producing materials for public consumption

Learning
• Holding public lectures – and putting podcasts on-line
• ‘The Global Philosopher’
• Its academics becoming public intellectuals – communicating to publics; enhancing the public sphere

Human subjectivity
• Putting classes in contact with like classes in another country – students as global citizens.
• UN Sustainability Development Goals

Culture
• Encouraging cross-cultural activities among students – an international cultural space
• Open spaces for cultural happenings for the community

Social institutions
• Working with local/regional communities in addressing social issues
• Working with groups/communities in the developing world

Natural environment
• Examining how disciplines can address matters of environmental concern
• ‘The Sustainable University’
Points to note (about this ecological perspective)

- Neither the economy nor the natural environment are privileged.
- A large number of zones of influence and impact.
- Each university differently placed – own resources (money/epistemologies/networks …)
- So each university has its own possibilities.
- BUT: they are not immediately evident but have to be imagined, created, designed.
- No mention of teaching or research – reconceiving the U and its resources.
- A balance between utopianism and realism.
Combining ‘contract’ and this ecological perspective

• Each nation to design a framework in which each of its universities forms a compact with the state

• A rolling contract

• In each contract, each university sets out its goals in each of the seven (eco)zones, say for the next 5 years.

• Each eco-plan would be subject to an assessment

• Each university would be accountable not just to the state but to the wider society.
Enter the idea of responsibility

• Little is heard of the idea of responsibility

• Overall, each compact will – at least implicitly – contain a sense of the university recognising that it has responsibilities towards the wider world in its totality.
The matter of leadership

• Both ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ are crucial but
• We should keep clear water between them
• Tendency to reduce ‘leadership’ to ‘management’
• The relationship should be round the other way,
• To put management in the service of leadership
• (As Churchill said of the scientists (and probably generals) ‘On tap, not on top’)
• University leaders have to become Leonardo da Vincis, all seeing but also inspired and creative for humanity and for the whole world.
But a contract has two sides

- And what of the state? What is its part?

**Threefold:**

1. Yes, to assess each university’s ecological game-plan (across the 7 ecozones) on behalf of society – its feasibility for the particular university.

2. To provide the university with resources that are appropriate to the university in providing those public, social, economic and cultural goods.

3. To provide the university with sufficient autonomy to provide those goods (and not arbitrarily limit those autonomies).
Reflections 1: demanding and yet releasing

- Enormously demanding of both universities and state but would release each party (from its anxieties and from its limited situation).
- **The university** would not only be specifying the ‘publie goods’ it would aim to provide across the 7 ecozones (societal outreach, enhancing wellbeing, economic creativity, cultural innovation)
- **But:**
  - Would also implicitly be indicating the ‘moral goods’ to which it bears allegiance (eg openness, equity, epistemological adventurousness, cooperation, courage ..)
- **The state** would provide new autonomies to their universities but have a basis for confidence in universities and for trusting ‘delivery’.
Reflections (2) – A new constitution for the university sector

• In prospect here is a totally new constitution for the university sector.
• It would have explicitness, openness, and an equality between the parties.
• It would involve – to some degree – all the relevant parties
• It would dramatically lessen mistrust
• It would/ could do justice to the universities’ historic callings – of truth, knowledge, autonomy, academic freedom
• It would provoke imaginative thinking about the university in the C21
• But understood that all have to be continually matters of negotiation
• It would also begin to bring universities and democracy together in a new relationship (eg Animal rights – who speaks for animals? Glacier rights?)
Conclusions

• The relationship between universities and society and the state/ and society is fraying and is close to disintegration
  – *And this is a matter crucial to the whole world in the C21.*
• There are straws in the wind for a better relationship
  – Some (perhaps many) university leaders are imaginative,
    ▪ (And even dip into the occasional book on the university)
• But this is all sporadic, idiosyncratic, and highly uneven.
• We need a new settlement, with a framework that has permancy.
• The idea of a social contract is helpful here
• But it needs to be fleshed out, with encouragement
  – (a) to think ambitiously and creatively,
  – (b) to confront the challenges of the C21, and
  – (c) to think of ‘responsibilities’.
Recommendations

• Adopt an ecological perspective in the development of HE systems;
  – And even the idea of ‘the ecological university’
• 7 ecozones, for each university deliberately to confront
  – And to imagine its possibilities
    ▪ And to work out its plans for each zone
      » (This will involve considerable negotiation with
         ‘stakeholders’ within and beyond the university).
• This to form the basis for an agreed contract with the state
• **BUT** will the parties ever agree to it?— for it imposes considerable
  demands on both the university sector and the state.
• I fear that the present state of messiness and uneasy, simmering
  and mutual mistrust will seem just more convenient …