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 (eg 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 (diminishiing prospects for social mobility)
    6. Divided societies: those who have experienced higher education and those who have not. (eg 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.

- Sociallly/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).

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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
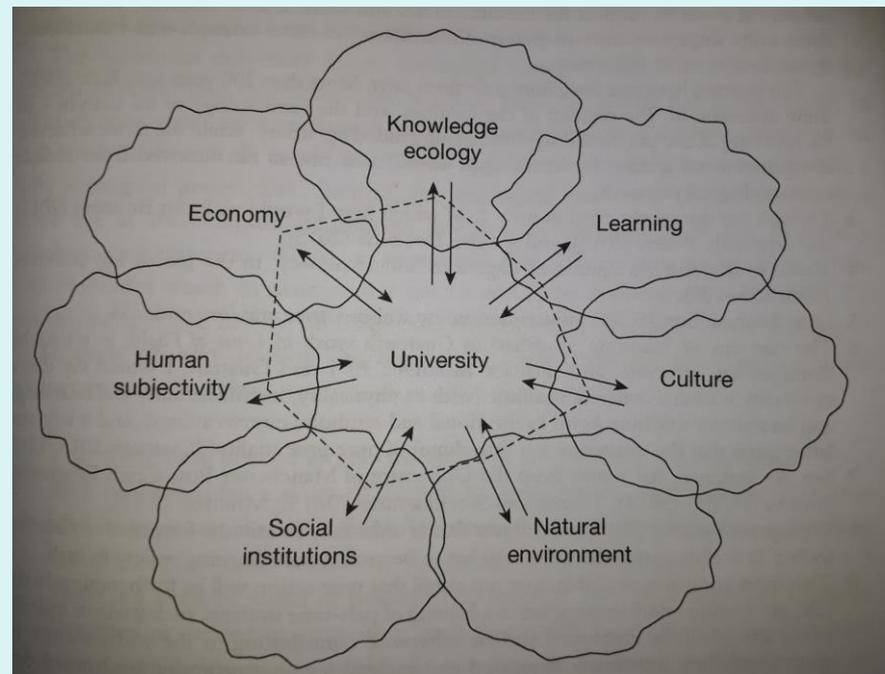
Possibilities
(which vary in range and depth and ethical aspects)

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 proably 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 …

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