

When is a ‘University’ not a ‘University’? – A Changing Concept

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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of ‘university,’ as that is currently experienced in Britain, raises issues about the educational aims and values which universities are understood to promote as they respond to wider social changes, economic usefulness, government control, marketisation and the digital revolution. But is this ‘changing nature’ not an example of what Wittgenstein referred to as ‘philosophical problems arising when language goes on holiday’? Although the paper focuses explicitly on the developments taking place in England, the conceptual issues it raises have more general application.

INTRODUCTION

A paper by Professor Ron Barnett (2017) pointed to the developing concept (or ‘constructing’) of ‘university,’ showing how this development in part reflects changing social and economic conditions. However, it provokes the question as to whether we can refer, as John Henry Newman so eloquently claimed, to ‘*The Idea of a University.*’ Should Newman not, in the light of Ron Barnett’s argument, have called the title of his work ‘*The New Idea(s) of a University*’? Concepts do indeed develop in the light of new ideas and experiences. Ought there not to be, therefore, as Ron Barnett argues, a constant re-constructing of ‘university’ (i.e., what we mean by the word) to accommodate the changing social reality to which it applies?

However, a key question must be: may a concept so change that it is no longer the *same* concept and so that the apparent sameness may be due to the misuse of the word? It may be a case of what Wittgenstein referred to as ‘the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language,’ against which ‘philosophy is a constant battle’ (1958:109, p.47).

That is a question which needs to be urgently answered in the light of the Government’s White Paper published on 16th May 2017, the subsequent Government’s *Higher Education and Research Act* (HERA), and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS).

This paper, therefore, identifies some key social changes which have inevitably led to the gradual ‘reconstruction’ of what we mean by ‘university.’ As the ‘critical realists’ might say, ‘ontological realism’ reflected in ‘epistemological relativism.’ But there is a limit to relativism in that the reality might be ‘misrepresented in the new ‘social construction.’

Not *any* construction or re-construction is acceptable, because

- it has to relate to a reality independent of our constructions, and
- the constructed concepts, in order to make sense, have to relate logically to a family of concepts. (That is, *together*, they function in a particular use of language which reflects what Wittgenstein referred to as ‘a form of life.’)

CHANGING SOCIAL REALITY AND CHANGING ‘CONSTRUCTIONS’ OF ‘UNIVERSITY’

Here, therefore, I wish to identify the changing ways in which we have come to conceive ‘university’ (reflecting changing social reality, economic usefulness, political control, management dominance, and market forces) before raising (in the following section) the question: how far can the concept of the university change before the word ‘university’ is used purely equivocally?

A World Set Apart:

In the words of Michael Oakeshott (1972, p.24), a university is ‘a world set apart’ – a community of scholars for the pursuit of learning for its own sake. One might say that, in keeping with this ideal, many new universities in England were constructed (physically, that is) in the 1950s and 1960s in leafy campuses away from the distractions of commercial life. For Newman (1852) in his book, *The Idea of a University*, similarly, it was a place for teaching universal knowledge, such universal knowledge requiring continuing scholarship and an interdisciplinary community.

Liberal learning, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence.

Such intellectual excellence lay (again in the words of Oakeshott) in the initiation into ‘the conversation between the generations of mankind’ in which the neophytes come to appreciate the ‘different voices’ of poetry, of philosophy, of science, of history which constitute that conversation. Training for a specific role or profession was alien to this ideal, for as John Stuart Mill argued

there is tolerably general agreement [that a university is not] a place of professional education ...not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings (Mill, J.S: 1867)

This might be seen to reflect a social reality shaped by what the philosopher Coleridge (1972 edition p. xviii and throughout) referred to as the ‘clerisy,’ that is, enjoyed

by the relatively few who, being capable of such disinterested pursuit of the truth, were ‘charged with looking after the moral and cultural interests of the nation.’ In Newman’s case, it was a relatively small collegiate family where students were intensively taught in a tutorial system and where, across the disciplines, they lived and dined together in Hall. But such a precious view of the university could hardly survive the massive expansion of university beyond a relatively small social elite.

Social expansion, economic usefulness, and wider understanding of ‘knowledge’:

The 1963 Robbins Report, *Higher Education*, questioned the previously assumed ‘restricted pool of ability’ – reflecting the changed social reality following the introduction, after 1944, of secondary education for all. But also, as part of that expansion (there are now as many as 130 degree awarding bodies in the U.K. to choose from), professional usefulness was seen much more to be part of the university ideal, especially given the perceived importance of technology and engineering for an advanced economy. However, there was reluctance to let such professionally and practically focused institutions (even though now part of the *higher education* system) into the university club. Were they really *universities*? For a time, the ‘binary divide’ (for example, between universities and polytechnics) within higher education was preserved. But then Polytechnics, Teacher Education Colleges and Colleges of Advanced Technology (via Polytechnic status) became integrated within the university system. The changing view of university followed, both through its wider social inclusion (no longer the ‘clerisy’ as conceived by Coleridge) and through its perceived responsibility for the wider social and economic good. (See in this respect also the Dearing Report, 1977.) Indeed, Gibbons *et al.* (1994) illustrated the impact of these wider responsibilities in the production of a more fluid map of organised knowledge reflecting the practical demands from outside the university rather than simply the logical nature of the disciplines of knowledge as conceived from within the university.

However, problems arise from such rapid expansion, for instance, in the comparability of degree standards and awards across higher education – an issue to be raised later.

Employer partnered universities:

What was inconceivable to Oakeshott’s ‘in a world set apart’ would be a key role for employers in the structure and content of university courses. However, in recent years, we have seen the

rapid growth of Employer Sponsored Degrees, led especially by newer universities which have strong links with specific sectors of the economy, where costs are shared between government, business and graduates, and where there is on-the-job training (normally with work-based modules) and accreditation by professional bodies including employers. Across the U.K., 10% of students are so sponsored, and at one London based university over one-third are sponsored by nearly 1000 employers who play an active and integral part in the shaping of the content and the standards of the degree-level work. There has, therefore, been created an integration between undergraduate study and higher level apprenticeships, of which there were 11,600 in the first quarter of 2017/18.

Research University

There have been created institutions which are dedicated to advanced research in specific subject areas, thereby seemingly alien to the ideal where scholarship would be integrated with teaching of universal knowledge' But, through development of science in particular, there comes a concentration on research for its own sake either as part of the university or as the *raison d'être* of university research institutions. Indeed, the now regular rating of universities on their research profile, not until recently on their teaching, shifts the meaning of what counts as excellence in a university and thus its dominant purpose ('what it is for'). It is a brave academic who, in concentrating on teaching as in the past, rejects the urge to publish. There has been, therefore, a massive increase in the number of journals (especially 'on-line') offering to publish, and serving therefore what is referred to as the 'impact factor' in determining the place of universities in the higher education league tables, which have become an important element in the present 'marketisation' of the institutions.

Distance Learning universities:

A further more radical shift in the idea of 'university' occurs where the notion of community is diluted – when it is no longer located in a particular place, thereby attenuating the interaction between learner and teacher and between learner and learner across disciplines. The sense of community is diminished but does not necessarily disappear because of the benefits of communication technology, namely:

- the ‘Open University’ type institution where courses are developed, often with the help of consultants, and where teaching is at a distance, conducted-through correspondence, dissemination of resources and occasional ‘summer schools’;
- MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and MOODLE, facilitated through internet communication, reaching out to many thousands of students, who gain access to carefully selected on-line resources, but where at the same time there is on-line interaction between the staff and students and between students and students.

Indeed, ‘in the digital age, what happened to newspapers will happen to universities’ according to the Vice-Chancellor of The Open University, as reported by Peter Wilby (*Guardian* 9.1.18). And it is the case that the Open University has closed seven regional English centres and opened up ‘call centres’ in providing digital learning through the aid of MOOCs.

One possible casualty is the assumption that a first degree requires three years of full-time study. There is now strong advocacy for two-year degrees (involving possibly more intensive teaching), part-time degrees (which once flourished) and modular degrees (which might be taken over a longer period of time).

Single Subject universities:

Another development is where institutions, which have been granted the title and status of ‘university,’ specialise in a single professional preparation, as in the case of Business Schools offering the MBA degree. Such institutions seem a far cry from the ‘communities of scholars’ in ‘places set apart where excellences may be heard because of the din of worldly laxities and partialities is silenced or abated.’ (Oakeshott, 1975). Indeed, there is a danger that; in pursuing an external, purpose (for example, employment as an investment banker) there may not be the critical engagement with the discourse which normally one would expect in a so-called university.

‘For-Profit’ Alternative Providers

The Higher Education Bill/ White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, which preceded the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, sought to allow private companies to set themselves up as ‘universities,’ with limited oversight. These will market themselves with a view to making a profit in an increasingly competitive higher education market. They will not be beholden to existing protections for teaching quality and academic freedom (as has been provided by the Higher Education Funding Council, Privy Council and Quality Assurance Agency). Some are

accredited by private universities abroad, such as the BPP University which was part of the U.S. Apollo Group). The quality of some of the new arrivals has been severely questioned. BPP provides an example of the emerging difficulties arising from ‘private for profit companies’ being granted university status, but taken over by another company in 2017, after its owner was sold to a private equity consortium for \$1.1 billion (see Evans, G.R., 2018, p.6). An extreme example of the problem of a private degree awarding institution would be that of Trump University, established before Mr Trump became President and which soon collapsed, leaving many high-fee students stranded without a qualification.

Market forces institutional competition

A recent report by the Reform think-tank points to the ‘unrelenting’ increase in top degrees over the last 20 years. Presently a quarter of all universities have given first-class honours to almost a third of students, up from 9 per cent in the 1990s. According to the report, ‘Universities are essentially massaging the figures, changing algorithms and putting borderline candidates north of the border,’ partly as a way of attracting students in a ‘competitive market.’

PROBLEMS EMERGING

The ‘Managed University’:

‘University,’ as a collection of scholars jointly pursuing the advancement of intellectual excellence, would seem eroded by the onset of the ‘management-speak.’ The Jarrett Report of 1985, coterminous with the ‘public service reforms’ outlined in a number of Government White Papers in the 1980s, introduced a language which would have been alien to Oakeshott, Mill or Newman. Be it noted, the way we conceptualise reality is embedded in the language we use. It is important, in so arguing, to quote that report quite fully.

The crucial issue is how a university achieves the maximum value for money consistent with its objectives (2.12). Each department should maintain a profile of ‘indicators of performance’ to include standing costs of space, utilities (telephones, etc.), market share of applications, class sizes, staff workloads, graduation rates and classes of degrees (3.33). A range of performance indicators should be developed, covering both inputs and outputs and designed for use both within individual universities and for making comparisons between institutions (5.4). The headships of departments ... ideally should be both a manager and a leader (4.27).

The language of ‘performance indicators,’ ‘targets,’ ‘inputs and outputs,’ ‘metric measurements,’ learners as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’ is hardly compatible with that of

engagement with key texts, the pursuit of excellence, the fostering of critical enquiry, the struggle with difficult ideas, the entry into a ‘conversation between the generations.’ As Robert Scott (2018) concludes in his recent book *How University Boards Work*,

Another concern is that higher education governance is becoming too corporate, too top-down, too focused on money over mission, on marketing and status over student and faculty success. It sometimes seems as if institutional leaders have forgotten the purposes and values that have distinguished higher learning and continue to do so.

Loss of autonomy

The examples given seem to reflect a changing idea of ‘university’ - or rather, in some cases, an expanding idea of what one means by ‘university’ - due to responses to social changes, arising from

- expansion and inclusivity such as that following the Robbins Report in 1963, namely, rapid expansion of higher education from a relatively small elite through the inclusion of what were polytechnics and teacher training colleges;
- opportunities opened up by communication technology, as in the case of MOOCs and MOODL; increased insistence on economic and professional usefulness (or ‘impact’);
- employer involvement in the development of degrees and in the teaching;
- focus on research;
- introduction of for-profit providers, some from abroad;
- dominance of the language of management.

With some of those changes there is recognisable continuity in what is meant by ‘university’ in terms of community of scholars, academic autonomy, and interaction between the branches of scholarship except where the Research University may be too narrowly focused in its concerns, or where cultivation of the intellect is too subordinated to training in specific professional skills, or where curriculum arises from pursuit of profit wherever that leads, or where dominance of management changes the very language of education and learning.

Internal to many of these ways of conceiving university, in response to social and economic demands, has been gradual erosion of the autonomy of institutions which have been given university status – a status once jealously protected through the University Grants

Committee (UGC), established in 1918, and then, from 1989, the University Funding Council (UFC), later Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC). Each Council acted as a buffer between Government as a source of funding and universities to ensure that the universities might preserve their independence of political influence. They were able to preserve their autonomy despite partial financial dependence (student fees covered only part of the costs). However, creation in 2018 of the Office for Students (OfS) and of a separate body for administering research funds (U.K. Research and Innovation – UKRI), erode that autonomy, facilitating the creation of new and private universities, and the potential to intervene on courses of study. The 2nd clause on the 2nd page of the Parliamentary Bill stated

In performing its functions, including its duties under [the previous subsection], the OfS must have regard to guidance given to it by the Secretary of State ... framed by reference to particular courses of study.

The subsequent Higher Education Reform Act, section 14, declares that OfS

must determine and publish a list of principles applicable to the governance of English higher education providers.

OfS; therefore, (with its political appointments), has become the quality assessment body. Thus, in the words of Peter Wilby (*The Guardian*, 9.1.18)

The age of the ‘fortress university’ in which the academic was the custodian of knowledge, hiding behind ‘high barriers to entry, was nearing its end.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT OR CONCEPTUAL CHANGE?

Such curtailment of autonomy, which the community of scholars has traditionally cherished in upholding the independence of its critical ‘conversations’ within the respective disciplines, in deference to economic and political imperatives or to profit demands of private companies or to the managerialism which dominates university life, must raise the question as to whether such institutions can still be considered as universities as that was traditionally understood. No longer might ‘university’ necessarily refer to autonomous institutions, led by academic communities which are dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and to the transmission of that knowledge to the next generations.

Certainly, there are adaptations to the use of the word ‘university’ which should be seen as extensions of the original ideal: (for example, teaching enhanced and opened up by

communications technology, or by the perceived relevance to the social and civic good).

But are there not limits to conceptual development (that is, to what is included within the use of a word) without the word coming to mean something else, though (as in this case) trading off the meanings and values normally associated with the use of the word?

Therefore, some of these changes would seem incompatible with what we have previously meant by ‘university.’ But it is necessary, first, to pause to consider what is meant by conceptual change. Gradual though this be (due to social changes, new insights into student potential for access, revision of subjects to be included, fundamental ways in which scientific, social and cultural knowledge is produced – see Gibbons *et al*, 1994), not any new application of the word ‘university’ can count as a development of the concept. Concepts change, though recognisably as an extension of the prevailing use of the word (as embracing more cosily, in the words of Ron Barnett, the ‘conceptual hinterland’) as happened post-Robbins Report. And, indeed, more fundamental developments such as those represented by MOOCs and MOODL might well be allowed into the university fold where criteria, implicit in the original ideal of Oakeshott and Newman, can be demonstrated.

However, as the use of a word changes, reflecting different forms of social life, it begins to lose its relationship to that form of life in which it was, and has been for long, attached. One might say it becomes a different concept. The criteria for applying the concept have changed.

It is necessary, therefore, to make explicit what those criteria were. Failing to meet those is, it would be more like the use of the word ‘station’ to mean both ‘railway station’ and ‘station in life’ – the same word, but different meanings. Thus, the Government would seem to be increasing the number of universities by *redefining* what is meant by ‘university,’ just as it increased apprenticeships by redefining what we mean by ‘apprentice.’ It does this by an ostensive definition – that is, by pointing to a particular institution and, for its practical political purposes, naming it as ‘university.’ Thereby, the new kind of institution (for example, the ‘for-profit’ universities now being introduced), carrying the emotive attraction normally associated with ‘university,’ is more able to sell itself on the open market.

Of course, for this to be done, there must be some connection between the traditional

sense of ‘university’ and the new ostensibly defined meaning. Both, for example, are places where learning takes place. But if that is all that connects the two, it would be equally acceptable to re-define 6th form colleges or even secondary schools as universities – the meaning of a word would be simply what those in positions of power define it to be.

CRITERIA FOR REFLECTING THE *UNCHANGING* ‘IDEA OF UNIVERSITY’

What then are the criteria by which, despite the changes outlined above, would seem fundamental to a form of life traditionally picked out by the word ‘university’?

First, *the pursuit of learning* – though extended to cover ‘useful knowledge’ (e.g., preparing to be lawyers) and to the ‘practical learning’ which embodies a theoretical perspective (e.g., engineering);

Second, *academic freedom of the teachers* because they are so chosen and qualified as to be able to be engage seriously with the knowledge and practices being transmitted;

Third, *a community of teachers and learners*, making possible cross-disciplinary conversations in understanding theoretical and social issues (single subject institutions, such as schools of legal training or business studies, hardly constitute ‘university’);

Fourth, *engagement in critical enquiry* based on scholarship and research;

Fifth, *institutional control and independence* over the organisation of the institution, not beholden to the changing requirements of Government or private companies;

Sixth, *prevalence of certain virtues*: respect for the truth, care for the learner, openness to criticism.

Finally, *quality assurance* with accountability to the wider academic community, exercised through external examining or (since public money is invested in the institutions) through a national ‘Quality Assurance Agency,’ with full representation of the universities’ teachers and researchers, but quite independent of political authority. But already we are witnessing, under the changing idea of university’ the dilution of such quality assurance.

Clearly several of the institutional developments referred to above would not qualify for the title ‘university,’ whatever the ‘social constructions’ through which they have come to be so called. There are limits to what can be meaningfully constructed, and it is surely a

duty of the philosophy of higher education to enable one (in the words of Wittgenstein), ‘to pass from what is disguised nonsense to recognise it as patent nonsense’.

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