London Review of Education, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2004

The Purposes of Higher Education and the Changing Face of Academia

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ABSTRACT While there is no recognised sub-discipline of 'the philosophy of higher education', there has been a steady flow of writings having just such an orientation, a flow that has increased in recent years. That flow has mainly taken two courses. On the one hand, those of a conservative persuasion hold to an ideal of higher education largely separate from society and find themselves, thereby, trying to identify any possible intellectual spaces in which universities may enjoy a position of being their own end. On the other hand, those of a postmodern persuasion convince themselves that no large purposes of their own can seriously be entertained by universities and that, therefore, only instrumental ends are available or that universities have simply to content themselves with their own form rather than their substance. Such a limited set of responses to the contemporary situation of universities is unnecessary. The very complexity of that situation, intermeshed as it is with the wider society, opens up new spaces and new universal challenges. It is possible for there to be a philosophical enterprise in relation to the university that also embraces large concerns and large future-oriented possibilities.

Introduction

In this paper, I shall attempt to lay out the current state of play in regard to what might be termed 'the philosophy of higher education'. Such a task, however, presents some rather large difficulties.

Firstly, there is no branch of the philosophy of education that has been systematically developed so as to form such a philosophy. Partly, this is a consequence of there being no infrastructure: to my knowledge, there are no departments, units or research centres in the world that even have a primary interest in the philosophy of higher education. As a result, there is, for example, no journal that is devoted to the matter.

Secondly, unlike 'education', 'higher education' is more or less entirely coincident with institutions of higher education. While we can speak of educational activities and talk, for instance, of a person educating themselves outside of a formal institutional setting, this is much more difficult if not impossible in relation to higher education. That someone could be engaged in 'higher education' informally or could give themselves a 'higher education' makes little sense.

The concept of higher education refers to particular institutions in the world in a way that the concept of education does not. Accordingly, there can be no pure 'philosophy of higher

ISSN 1474-8460 print; ISSN 1474-8479 online/04/010061-13

DOI: 10.1080/1474846042000177483

education': any such activity, if it is to have any legitimacy, would have to have its feet fairly firmly on the ground and take account of empirical dimensions of the institutional and organisational features of higher education as it exists at any one time.

Thirdly, institutions of higher education are significantly different between themselves: it is not obvious that a research-led internationally respected university, with an annual budget of well over a billion dollars per year, has much in common with a community college that conducts no research. This diversity within higher education is being compounded by new developments across the world. The emergence of corporate universities, the use of digital technologies so creating virtual universities, the development of markets in higher education, and the formation of global alliances: developments such as these are changing rapidly the character of universities and increasing the diversity between them. We can no longer talk with confidence about 'the university'. Under those circumstances, the task of a philosophy of higher education cannot sensibly be seen as a project that defines the conceptual conditions of what it is to be a 'university', for universities, self-evidently, no longer possess an obvious unity among themselves.

Lastly, the concepts of 'higher education' and 'university' are different. Not all institutions of higher education are universities although, in some countries, institutions that do not enjoy the title often aspire to it while elsewhere (notably, the USA) any organisation can call itself a university. More importantly, however, we may want to question whether it is the case that all universities are providing a genuine 'higher education'. There are two points here. On the one hand, there is at work here an internal politics of the language: in particular, the term 'university' characteristically has certain resonances—such that it becomes a prized label to an enterprise. On the other hand, in most countries, the term 'university is a protected title and is conferred by the state only under certain conditions.

We have to start, therefore, with what may appear to be two negative and even dismal observations. Firstly, there is no sub-discipline of the philosophy of education that we can seriously suggest amounts to a 'philosophy of higher education'; and secondly, it is by no means clear in the twenty-first century as to what a philosophy of higher education could look like. As a consequence, debate over the ends that higher education might serve is impoverished and a possible opportunity to identify imaginative purposes is being lost.

Purposes, Changes and Context

Before trying to bring some more positive perspective to bear, our initial observations as to the complexity of the context of any would-be philosophy of higher education have first to be compounded.

Perhaps even more than school education, higher education is changing with remarkable rapidity. Many advanced societies have witnessed or are witnessing at this time the transformation of an elite system of higher education into a mass system, a situation that the USA has enjoyed—if that is the term—for perhaps fifty or more years. There are certain other large changes that are also near universal across the world. We have just touched on some, but a more precise specification may be helpful:

- globalisation;
- the revolution brought by the arrival of digital technologies;
- the interpenetration of higher education with the wider host society;
- agendas of participation, access and equal opportunities;
- marketisation of higher education, with institutions identifying their knowledge services for potential customers;
- competition;

- the development of systematic and nationwide state-sponsored quality evaluation mechanisms.

This list amounts to a formidable set of challenges to institutions of higher education and it brings other changes in their wake, which have even more direct philosophical implications. I shall pick out just two. Firstly, the interpenetration of higher education and the wider society has an immediate impact on the knowledge base of universities. That wider society is taken to be a 'knowledge society' of which two features stand out. On the one hand, the knowledge society is a society in which the production of knowledge is distributed widely across society. Not yet everyone is involved in knowledge creation, but it is a widespread business. Transnational corporations, indeed, have their own 'knowledge officers'. On the other hand, and following on, what counts as knowledge becomes open: the wider society spawns its own definitions of legitimate knowledge, characteristically more performative, more transactional and more founded on multi forms of representation. The interpenetration of higher education and the wider society, therefore, raises sharp epistemological questions: what are to be the criteria of valid knowledge by which the university orients itself? Are these criteria to be furnished to any degree by the wider society? Under these circumstances, can there be firm criteria of knowledge?

As a second example of the philosophical implications of the interpenetration of higher education and the wider society, the concepts of 'academic freedom' and even 'academic community' are placed in some difficulty. The reasons are mixed and only a brief resumé is possible here. As the university seeks to identify and market its knowledge services, academics are placed differentially in that endeavour. Most academics, in almost any discipline, are able to find market opportunities, but the opportunities for those in biotechnology, computer sciences and electronic engineering characteristically exceed those opportunities available to their colleagues in classical civilisation, philosophy, English literature and anthropology. There develops, as a result, even sharper divisions across the 'academic community'; it is not clear that there is much that binds together academics into a community, even in the same institution. The idea of academic community is, therefore, in jeopardy, but so is the idea of academic freedom.

If academics are freely marketing their services, often for considerable economic return, to the wider society, it is not clear that the concept of academic freedom has much purchase; or at least, it seems to be undergoing a radical shift. It stood for the right freely to research, to teach and to speak out in academic settings (the university being regarded as a haven for critical thought). Now, academic freedom appears to be becoming the right to exploit the exchange value inherent in academics' knowledge. 'Academic freedom' marked a calling from within: now, it seems to herald simply a personal interest indicative of a calling from without and, with it, a dissipation of former responsibilities to an academic ethic (Shils, 1983).

I cite these two examples—of the epistemological base of the university and the problematic nature of the two concepts of academic freedom and academic community—simply as that: examples of the philosophical implications of the societal and global transformations to the university's environment. This reflection suggests that the title of this paper could equally be reversed. It is the changing face of academia that gives rise to questions about the purposes of higher education at least as much as it is that considerations of the purposes of higher education raise questions about the changes that are occurring to academia.

In summary, then, we can say that a philosophy of higher education is in for a challenging time. Any philosophising in the context of higher education has to be impure: it cannot just content itself with an examination and a proffering of concepts. Such an exercise will be

bound to be jejune, becoming a wordplay that fails to engage with the large transformations that are happening in higher education. Further, a failure to be empirical in part will be likely to result in analyses and ideas that are non-feasible. There will be a likelihood that the analysis implicitly relies on a conception of higher education as it was at some 'golden point' in the past and that the ensuing ideas lack any legitimacy as a realistic project. An attempt to produce a pure philosophy of higher education—constructed by the philosophers and through their frameworks—would run the risk of being an ideology, a wish fulfilment on the part of the philosophers hankering after—as they would see it—better times, being a tacit parading of hopes of and a longing for an age that is gone in which academic life was simpler, clearer and purer. To put the point more positively, a philosophy of higher education, if it is to command any respect outside of that very small group of academics who are interested in such matters, has to be a *social* philosophy of higher education (cf.. Williams, 2002). It has not only to start from the empirical conditions in which higher education finds itself, but also emerge with ideas that have some practical as well as conceptual feasibility. Any philosophy of higher education that fell short of that dual aim would enjoy neither legitimacy nor effectiveness.

The End of the Idea of Higher Education?

Over the past twenty years, a philosophical literature on the university has emerged, although to put it in this way could be said to be generous. It arises out of a (largely French) poststructuralist and a postmodern background and has certain characteristics. Its starting points are that we are a post-foundational world (the philosophical assumption that there can be no ultimate grounding of ideas), that large ideas ('metanarratives') face only 'incredulity' and that the changing face of academia presents largely a set of problematic changes. This set of starting points can generate only a limited sense of the idea of higher education. For Lyotard (1984), the university is exhibiting a lurch towards 'performativity' in its epistemologies: what is less clear is that Lyotard offers any sense of any positive operational or even conceptual options available to the university. Separately, and drawing on the metaphor of a lever, Derrida (1992) implies that the university has some leverage available to it in the modern society and even talks of its 'responsibility' but leaves it unclear as to what that responsibility would look like.

For the American, Bill Readings, the university is into a kind of post-history of its own. Readings' (1996) book, *The University in Ruins*, constitutes that rare thing—a serious attempt to offer a philosophical account of contemporary higher education. On Readings' view, having passed through the phases of 'the university of reason' and 'the university of culture' in the past two hundred years, the university is now 'the university of excellence' in an age of systematised quality systems. This, for Readings, is a non-ideological state, since this university has been emptied of all serious purpose. Excellence is a vapid concept: any institution can interpret it in any way whatsoever. This, therefore, constitutes a kind of backhand answer to Derrida: the responsibility of the twenty-first century university is to be 'excellent', with the idea of excellence standing for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular. Readings' answer to his own analysis is to advance the idea that the university should become 'a community of dissensus'. If there can be no agreement on fundamental frameworks within the university, at least the university can become a forum for debate and dispute and in that way open up a discursive space in a society in which conceptual horizons are being drawn ever narrowly.

Readings' analysis and conceptual proposals undermine the title of his book. His suggestion that the university might become 'a community of dissensus' implies that a positive role lies in front of the university: despite the title, the university does not need to

live in 'ruins' after all. His argument is also curious in a second way. For Readings, the university is in a post-historical age, in which the state is emptied of ideology and, with it, all of its leading institutions. The university, as a result, has lost its way, shorn of any large ideas (truth, reason, culture) that could carry it forward. But then what is 'the community of dissensus' if it is not a large idea that could carry the university forward? And around what key concepts would such a community unite when those on which the university has been built for the last two hundred years have so dissolved that the university has been undermined and is now 'in ruins'?

There should be sympathy for Readings. Those who wish to sustain a positive idea of the university have a difficult time of it just now. The days when one could espouse nonchalantly a positive idea of the university (witness, for example, Newman, Jaspers, Moberly, Minogue) are over. Empirically and conceptually, the universalism contained in the idea of the university and which made possible such stories, has dissolved. Empirically, the modern university became a set of separate *academic tribes and territories* (Becher & Trowler, 2001) and the post-modern university then decentred itself altogether as its boundaries weakened and as it merged with the wider society. Conceptually, the ideas on which the modern university was built—truth, knowledge, reason, communication—all stood in the dock as mere detritus. If these concepts had any mileage at all, it lay in their separate interpretation by different communities both within and without the university. The university, therefore, was—as it were—emptied out, conceptually and empirically: it was no longer clear that the university could be said to be standing for any particular set of ideas, or to have any particular set of purposes. At best, all it might sponsor were proliferating and conflicting purposes: the university was breaking apart.

Nearly 40 years ago, Clark Kerr (1972 edition) coined the term 'the multiversity' but it was just possible that, under the extraordinary range of activities that were contained in the university, there lay some common substrate that could be said to unify the university. Over the last generation or so, one vision of such a common substrate has been implied in the work of the German theorist, Jurgen Habermas. Within his approach, which contained full frontal attacks on poststructuralism and postmodernism (Habermas, 1990), the university could be said to be an institution—perhaps *the* institution—assisting in the construction of the rational society. It is able to do this precisely because it holds to the ideal of the university as a forum for sustaining 'the ideal speech situation'. In this situation, participants are treated and treat each other as equals, communication is oriented towards a collective understanding of truth, and claims are adjudicated by recourse to the better argument. Discourse itself was to be layered by a tacit adherence to so-called 'validity claims' of rightness, sincerity, and truthfulness. This vision of the rational university underpinning the rational society was, admittedly, counterfactual: Habermas was not making empirical claims about the university but offering a critical standard by which institutions wishing to carry the title might be judged.

Despite having his followers, Habermas' project of wanting to establish a binding and critical framework of *communicative action* is perhaps losing ground to the postmoderns and the posthistorians. It is not surprising that we should see a book bearing the title of *The University in Ruins*. In a fluid age—or, as Bauman (2000) brilliantly puts it, in an age of *Liquid Modernity*—our means for gaining a grip on the world are both too many and insufficient. We live (as I have termed it elsewhere) in an age of *supercomplexity* (Barnett, 2000). In such an age, our frameworks for understanding ourselves and the world around us proliferate and compete with each other. Old certainties have to dissolve. Readings is right on that point. The question is where do we go from here? Is it possible, in any sense, to sustain an idea of the university, which genuinely serves as a unifying idea? Almost the slogan of the

postmoderns is that we are witnessing the end of the universal: how, then might it be possible to do justice to the idea of the university, an idea that is utterly dependent on the idea of the universal? Perhaps the idea of the university is at an end after all.

Practical Matters

I said earlier that any adequate philosophy of higher education has to have its feet on the ground: in the first place, it has to start by trying to understand higher education as it is, not as some might wish it to be. There is an important role for such a philosophy to play in proffering imaginative ideas and articulating concepts and frameworks that can serve as critical standards against which contemporary policies and practices might be judged *but* such an enterprise—to gain legitimacy—has to grind, at some points, against an understanding of those policies and practices. Earlier, I offered a list of some major shifts that are taking place in higher education, more or less across the world. There are both pessimistic and optimistic readings of those changes; and some strange intellectual alliances are springing up in those responses.

Both the traditionalists *and* those who see themselves as avant-garde espouse parallel critiques of contemporary changes in academia. The traditionalists bemoan, as they see it, a loss of standards (amid cultural and epistemological relativism) and the loss of purity of mission (with the intermingling of higher education and the world of work). Those of a more radical persuasion voice concerns that the university has so taken on agendas of responsiveness to the knowledge economy, accountability and efficiency that the separateness that formerly marked off the university from the wider world and gave discursive space for it to supply an oppositional voice is being diminished, if it has not altogether vanished. (Compare, for instance, Gordon Graham's *Universities: the recovery of an idea* (2002) with a quite different volume appearing at the same time, *For a Radical Higher Education: After Postmodernism* (Taylor *et al.*, 2002).)

The idea of the university as 'the critical conscience of society' now, on this more radical view, appears no longer to offer a set of ideals that can be realised. All universities have, in a sense, become corporate universities, run as businesses and engaging—so far as they can—with the business world; some are even corporations in the business world in their own right (Jarvis, 2001). The outer has become the inner: the university has taken on the agendas, the values, and the operating principles of the wider society. Under these conditions, there is and there can be no *ideal* of the university.

We may note that, in these accounts, there is an underlying unity between the conservatives and the radicals. The conservatives saw the university essentially as a form of intellectual if not exactly elite reproduction; the radicals saw it as a vehicle quite different, as a means of sustaining an oppositional discourse and even generating social change, *even* revolutionary social change. On *both* views, however, the loss of separateness and of the intermeshing of the university with the wider society—at least, as a market—are matters of significant regret. With that intermeshing arrives an occlusion of categories once clear and under the ownership of the academic community: knowledge, truth, understanding. Whether the university was to be a means of conservation or transformation, the purity of these concepts was necessary on both counts. Now, in a more fluid age, two phenomena present themselves: the key concepts that marked out the university are now contested by the wider society which seeks to offer its own interpretations and even supplant those concepts as they are understood in the university *and* those concepts are overlain—and in the process distorted—by other concepts, such as competition, accountability, markets, information processing, learning environments, stakeholders, skill and competence.

We have, therefore, three sets of layered processes: (i) significant and worldwide transformations in the character of higher education (the kinds of changes in which sociologists, organisational theorists and policy analysts will have an interest); (ii) evolving and merging discourses about higher education; (iii) philosophical matters arising out of i and ii. A key question remains: given i and ii, what is the character of iii to be? Can a philosophy of higher education be little more than a lament that such a philosophy is no more and cannot be realised? Amid diversity, fluidity and an 'excessive accommodation' of higher education to the wider society (Galbraith, 1969), especially to the corporate world, can there be a serious role for a philosophy of higher education to perform?

It might be said that higher education still retains discursive space of its own and a philosophy of higher education can identify the features of the *discursive intent*—as we might put it—that still lays open to the university. Paul Standish (2003), for example, has spoken (in picking up an idea from Gordon Bearn) of higher education as being founded upon an interest in 'beauteous intensity'. But, even if we accept an argument of that kind, these are crumbs from the poor man's table. There are some little spaces still available to the university where it can be itself and the task of a philosophy of higher education then becomes that of specifying what that might amount to; namely, a specification of the aesthetic form of the university rather than the content of its discussions.

This is a poor strategy for two reasons. Firstly, it unduly diminishes the scope of a philosophy of higher education and, secondly, it pretends to a purity that higher education no longer enjoys. A philosophy of higher education can only become a valid intellectual endeavour under the conditions that we have surveyed and *not* by attempting to identify a discursive space in which the university can be itself but by addressing the intermingling of the university and the wider world head-on. In late modernity, that intermeshing is likely to accelerate and widen. A philosophy of higher education has, therefore, to take that conjunction as its starting point and not look longingly for interstices in that conjunction in which the university can be itself.

Engaging Universities

Two points emerge from this analysis. Firstly, the prospectus for a philosophy of higher education under conditions of late-modernity turn not on purity but on *engagement*. Whether it wishes it or not, the university is engaged with the wider world (cf. Bjarnason & Coldstream, 2003). We should, however, distinguish four different forms of engagement: (i) that form of engagement which is blind and unreflective—we might term this *non-reflectional*; (ii) that form of engagement which is entered into knowingly, where the major intent is *extractional*, that is, where university enters into a project only insofar as it can extract benefits to itself; (iii) that form of engagement which is entered into knowingly, where at least a significant part of the intent lies in the university realising a sense of itself in the context of imposed standards or expectations (for example, where a university accepts an accountability function within a state-imposed quality framework): call this *impositional*; lastly, (iv) that form of engagement which is entered into partly in virtue of a responsibility that the university sees itself as fulfilling *qua* 'university'—call this *realisational*.

Of these four forms of engagement (non-reflectional, extractional, impositional, realisational), only the last, the realisational, is philosophically interesting in that it invites questions as to the nature of the responsibility to which universities might come to feel that they had some form of obligation. *Just what is it to realise the university?* Does that kind of concept, of realisation of some large idea and even ideal of the university, make sense today? The realisational concept of engagement invites further questions as to what, in the contemporary era, we can feasibly take a university to be.

The first major philosophical question then turns, to pick up Derrida's concept, on that of *responsibility*. What, if indeed it has any at all, are the responsibilities of the university in the twenty-first century? What might it mean to employ the concept of responsibility under conditions of incorporation, fragmentation, liquidity and diversity? The second point is that of the status of such a philosophical enterprise. It is surely clear that, if the university is itself a set of fluidities, with many pools of activity, self-identity and conversations going on and reaching out to varied communities in the wider society, a philosophy of higher education cannot itself be a tightly bounded enterprise. The philosophers have to pool their resources with others to engage in a wider attempt to map out in general terms the character of higher education today.

Such an enterprise would amount to a *theory* of higher education. But there are a number of difficulties even with this term (broader, as it is, than the philosophy of higher education). Is it to be thought of as supplying 'a theory' or 'the theory' of higher education? Perhaps not either: perhaps the intellectual landscape is so uncertain that we should talk even more vaguely of just theorising about higher education. But a further difficulty arises over the concept of theory, particularly in this context for 'theory' has to do duty for different intellectual activities.

We can distinguish between (i) efforts to understand the changing character of higher education; (ii) efforts to look into the future and engage in 'future studies'; (iii) imaginative efforts to offer concepts and ideas that serve as a critical standard against which contemporary changes can be assessed; (iv) imaginative frameworks that seek to offer a vista of a possible form of higher education embodying certain values. Any one of these enterprises could be undertaken either modestly or grandly: the task may be local and conceptually small-scale or epic, calling for considerable courage.

These days, for understandable reasons, the latter is largely out of favour: a 'performative' world rules out of court, so some believe, large ideas, visions, and collective projects. This, at least, is the postmodern reading of our world but we should be cautious about such a story, especially in relation to higher education. In the Western world, despite their intermeshing with the wider world, and despite that wider world (through the state, the world of work, and client groups) exerting its limitations on the university—both in its self-understanding and its practices—universities continue to enjoy considerable space. They even enjoy space to articulate stories of postmodernism. In other words, by reminding ourselves about the practical space available to universities we remind ourselves also about the discursive space available to universities.

The postmodern story is not a recipe for closure but it is a recipe for restricted and local conversations. But there is an irony here for the postmodern story is itself a large story (indeed, set of stories) about the character of contemporary society, its discourses, epistemologies, cultures and identity structures: these are very large stories indeed. So the postmodern story undermines itself conceptually and practically: its very appearance demonstrates the capacity for large ideas that in themselves can take off into very large collective projects and even ideologies. In particular, its appearance tacitly demonstrates that the university is still an institutional vehicle for the production and projection of new ideas, imaginative thinking and challenging frameworks. On the surface, the postmodern story projects a picture of village conversations; at a deep level, it shows that universalism is still with us, and even in ideological form.

Prospects

The challenges of a philosophy of higher education for a fluid and complex age are now, surely, evident and, at the same time, both the role and the ingredients of such a philosophy.

The challenges are those of establishing a way of talking about higher education under the conditions that higher education faces. These conditions include those of internal fragmentation, fluid interactions with the wider society, a dissolution of identity structures (we can barely ask let alone answer the question any more 'What is a professor?') and simultaneously a squeezing of the discursive and operational space of the university *and* an opening up of those spaces (just as the state and the world of work impose new frameworks—of 'standards' and accountability and market disciplines—so new opportunities open, as the university becomes a key institution in the framing of the 'knowledge economy'). Under these conditions, a philosophy of higher education is discursively challenged. What is its role to be? What space does it have in which to work? What is the potential of its project?

The role of a philosophy of higher education in these circumstances can be constructed as a conceptually small-scale enterprise or large enterprise, but it is tending to take the former shape. There being no centres of educational research that focus on philosophical aspects of higher education (our opening observation), such topics have been picked up by others, not only, for example, by those working more broadly in the philosophy of education, but also by others working in the humanities, in cultural studies and in sociology. Such studies have understandably tended to be shaped by the collective understandings of those epistemic communities. Those studies tend to be technical and professional and are limited in their scope. Large visions for higher education that offer a new 'idea of the university' are unlikely to emerge from such a milieu.

The abandonment of large ideas for our understanding of the university is particularly ironic, for the present conjunction of circumstances—an empirical enmeshing of higher education and society *and* a fluidity in social and epistemological matters generally—opens up both spaces and responsibilities for the university. For the past one hundred and fifty years or so, the university has come to see itself as a site of critical reason and an institutional vehicle for enlightenment. To these two roles has been added more recently a role in furthering social democracy: agendas of human rights and equal opportunities are present now on campus. In all of this, large philosophical problems arise: how are we to conceive of the epistemological base of the university? Do individuals have a right to experience higher education? Does the university have a responsibility towards the development of 'the learning society' and, with it, citizenship in and across society? How is research to be understood and what, if any, are the responsibilities of researchers? (Most contemporary philosophical texts on higher education are almost entirely silent on science and research.) How are we understand 'higher learning' in the twenty-first century? What principles might inform pedagogy in higher education (whose clients are both adults and often paying considerable sums for their own education)?

These are large questions, furnishing a considerable role for a philosophy of higher education, but only provided that such an enterprise is willing (i) to work collaboratively with others (in the history of higher education; sociology of education; psychology; linguistics; discourse studies; cultural studies; policy studies; philosophy of science; philosophy in general; comparative studies; organisational studies and so on); and (ii) to work concretely with a sense of higher education as a site of engagement with the wider society.

There being no academic infrastructure in which such collaborative studies are likely to take off, the prospects for such a theoretical enterprise emerging cannot be high. Just at a time when the philosophy of higher education has both the responsibility and the social opportunity to raise large issues and generate large ideas (there is an audience for such an enterprise in a way that simply could not have existed before), those who work in the area are usually happy to work within limited frameworks speaking just, as it seems, to narrow

audiences (usually those who have particular kinds of technical expertise in the humanities).

The ingredients of such a large philosophy of higher education are, in one sense, simple: they are easily identifiable. But their effective use is less straightforward. For the ingredients of such an enterprise are imagination, generosity and courage: imagination to come forth with new frameworks to help us conceive of new ideas of the university; generosity to embrace other forms of scholarship and research that might inform our sense of the predicament—conceptually and empirically—of higher education; and courage, to withstand the voices of the experts who will frame their critiques from within their own limited epistemological frames, unwilling or unable to embrace the larger picture. A fourth ingredient is a foundation for the rest: it is that of attempting to develop a form of communication that reaches out to multiple audiences, those that have interests in higher education but who are not experts in its study. Large audiences await and some have yet to be formed that are or would be interested in matters concerning the purposes of the university if only a language could be constructed in which such matters were raised in ways intelligible to those audiences.

Recovering the University

The world is not just complex; it is supercomplex. This is particularly noticeable in higher education. Some say that we are witnessing the end of grand narratives. To the contrary: we are, in higher education, at least, replete with grand narratives. Is the university to be a site of democratic rights, of societal enlightenment, of knowledge production for a technological society, of inculcating skills for the workplace, of personal transformation or of critical analysis? Is it to get by through its own wits, transforming itself to take on the image of any client or state agency that comes its way or is it to maintain some kind of allegiance to a sense of an enduring entity? Are its internal processes to be characterised by tight managerial disciplines that enable it to live 'in the real world' or is to forge, within itself, a new kind of organic community?

The sheer posing of the questions indicates something of the range of constructions of the university that are apparently permissible today (even if some are more encouraged than others). Behind these constructions lie distinct constellations of concepts—around knowledge, democracy, work, enlightenment, persons and critique—that furnish alternative ways in which the university might understand itself. In practice, of course, they are all to be found within the university, even if different universities will exhibit their attachment to these conceptual clusters to different degrees. Further, the different clusters slide across each, with connections being formed and loosened continuously. Terms—such as critical thought, knowledge, skill, and personal development—can be found in multiple clusters of university purpose, taking on nuanced meanings in each conceptual milieu.

The state of contemporary academia can be quickly summarised, therefore. It is one in which the purposes of the university are so many pools of self-understanding on the part of the university itself. These pools of self-understanding are, in turn, part of wider discursive societal currents around ideas of democracy, enlightenment, personhood and economic growth. These discursive currents continue to widen, and to become more turbulent. The currents run against each other, and the university is caught up in it all.

In this maelstrom, terms such as chaos, turbulence, unpredictability, uncertainty, contestability, and challengeability present themselves. These terms present a new conceptual cluster by which we might understand the university, namely, the cluster of

fragility (cf. Stehr, 2001). Face with this situation, the faint-hearted shrink: for them, we can no longer think seriously about the purposes of higher education, as if there were any large purposes that it might pursue with any assurance. For those of this persuasion, the possibilities for the university's self-definition that crowd in upon it are so numerous, so conflicting and, worse still, so contradictory, that talk of unitary purposes has to be off-limits.

This is a counsel of despair and it is not the only option. A much more positive option lies, paradoxically, in the university seizing hold of the cluster of fragility as the dominant cluster for its self-understanding. If the world is characterised—as it is—by uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability and contestation, then let these ideas become the watchwords of the university in the twenty-first century. If, in the process, other hitherto dominant concepts—such as knowledge, truth and learning—are put in the shadows, so be it. By allowing the currents of fragility into itself, by giving them a warm embrace, the university can regain a position of giving *added-value* to the world, rather than simply—as it is becoming—providing to the world that which it calls for.

In an age of supercomplexity, the crucial matter is not one of knowledge but of *being* (to resort to a term from continental European philosophy). Knowledge is not repudiated as such, but it can no longer supply the dominant *weltanschauung* for the university. The limits of academic knowledge are becoming transparent, both in its lack of reflexivity and its inability fully to supply the epistemologies that the wider world of fast globalisation requires. More importantly, in such a world—of unpredictability and challengeability—knowledge is supplanted by *being* as the key term for the university (cf. Barnett, 2003).

If we cannot be sure what tomorrow will bring, conceptually as well as technologically and organisationally, new purposes open up for the university precisely around questions of being: how are we to live personally and collectively with uncertainty? How are we to relate both to the world and to each other when all bets are off? How do we understand research and teaching as sets of intentional acts in a context of radical uncertainty? The questions supply a new set of purposes for the university, namely *purposes of uncertainty*. There are three such purposes. In a context of radical uncertainty, the university becomes an institution that i) adds directly to our uncertainty in the world (by producing imaginative and challenging new frameworks or stories by which we might understand ourselves); ii) helps us to monitor and evaluate that uncertainty (by holding up for critical scrutiny the available frameworks (created in turn both within the university and across the wider society)); and iii) enables us to live with that uncertainty, through both the operational capacities and the existential capacities that it promotes on a personal level (in its pedagogical activities). In such purposes of uncertainty, we have a set of large purposes that offer the university—*and* the wider society—unity, durability and internal integrity.

Conclusion

Higher education across the world is undergoing a set of major changes. Some of those changes bring institutions of higher education into challenging relationships with the players in their wider environment—the host state, students as consumers, the world of work and, indeed, amidst competition and marketisation, other institutions of higher education. Other changes, partly as a consequence of the first set, set challenges for the university internally: managing and leading sets of largely autonomous staff; balancing the pulls of the disciplines and institutional interests; pedagogical relationships; the rights of students and academic identities. Two large philosophical questions are posed by these changes: firstly, how might we understand 'the university'? Secondly, can higher education be any longer taken to offer a liberal education?

The key term in the second of those questions, 'liberal education', stood for (i) objective knowledge and (ii) critical thought in (iii) autonomous institutions: all three elements are now put in doubt. The concept of liberal education appears to be undermined conceptually and operationally. Under these conditions—at once empirical and conceptual—the idea of the university, as an institution for higher education, appears also to be in trouble. The purposes for which it stood are no longer straightforwardly available to it. Many, indeed, believe that the university is in 'crisis'. Some even believe, as we have seen, that the university is 'in ruins'.

By retaining the *distinction* between higher education and university, it is possible, however, to do some justice to both ideas, even in the current situation. We have moved into an age of supercomplexity, which is characterised essentially by conceptual turmoil. We have no sure grip on who we are, how we relate to the world and, indeed, what the world is like. These are, as it were, sociological facts of our globalised world (rather than Nietzschian-like philosophical reflections). Under these conditions, the world needs the university more than ever and large purposes open up for it. These are the purposes of compounding our conceptual turmoil, enabling us internally (ontologically) to handle the uncertain state of *being* that results and assisting the world in living purposively amid that turmoil. These are large purposes for the university that provide it with integrity and a new universal purpose. They also echo with ideas of critical thought, enlightenment and emancipation and they even offer the prospect, therefore, of a higher education that is yet a liberal education.

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