

**What have the universities ever done for us?
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“What have the Romans ever done for us?” *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1983)

There is evidence, all around the world, of renewed interest in the civic and social role of universities. Every week seems to bring a new conference, somewhere, on the theme and, Morris Zapp-like, I’m tempted to go to them all.

I say “renewed” because a case can be made that the founding myths, and the constitutional origins of all but a very few universities are grounded in just such a role. Think of the poor scholars supported by the founders of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, the local and regional ambitions of the Victorian civics, the confederations of professional schools that came together to form the British Polytechnics and Central Institutions, and that’s just in the United Kingdom. In the US, the origins of many now elite private institutions lay in creating cadres of clergymen, teachers, lawyers and doctors to serve colonial and then state communities; the “land grant” universities were founded by direct investment of communities, mostly across the West, in creating useful knowledge; and so on.

And what is the twenty-first century legacy of such foundations? Surely it’s more than a boost to the bottom line of UK plc, or a bad-tempered response to an increasingly fractured and poorly-analysed “skills agenda.”

The university community within the community

To step back initially from the fray, University “civic engagement” can be described in two domains: first order and second order.

In this account *first order engagement* arises from the university just being there. One of the primary roles for universities is to produce graduates who:

- go to work (perhaps in areas completely unconnected with those they have studied);
- play their parts in civil society (where the evidence suggests they are likely to contribute more wisdom and tolerance than if they had not been to university);
- have families (and read to their children);
- pay their taxes (and return a proportion of their higher-than-average incomes as graduates through progressive taxation); and
- (increasingly) support “their” universities, through gifts and legacies.

Also in this domain, universities:

- guard treasures (real and virtual);
- provide a safe place for the exploration of difficult issues or challenging ideas; and
- supply material for a branch of popular culture (the campus novel, film and tv series). (Incidentally, like the best art, this genre sometimes leads and sometimes follows. I don’t think that there were departments of Elvis Studies or Hitler Studies before Don De Lillo called them into being, while David Lodge had to preface *Thinks*, his latest campus novel with the epigram: “The University of Gloucester is a fictional construct: at least it was at the time of writing.” A couple of decades earlier he similarly founded the University of Limerick. For more on all of this see Elaine Showalter’s wonderful recent book, *Faculty Towers*.)

Together these features add resonance to the university as a social institution in its own right: at its best a model of continuity and a focus of aspiration for a better and more fulfilled life; at its worst a source of envy and resentment. Understanding this first order relationship between universities and their communities provides an insight into the cultural role of universities and colleges in different national contexts: in the United States they are more loved and respected than they deserve; in Australian and the UK they stimulate more opprobrium than is objectively fair.

“First order” considerations also imply that universities should strive to behave well; to be ethical beacons. They haven’t always done so. Some examples of “bad behaviour” (explored in more detail below – especially as “second order” priorities can intrude) include the following:

- they can offer misleading promotion and advice, to staff, students and potential students, about their real performance and intentions;
- as powerful institutions they can undermine and intimidate their members, their partners and their clients;
- they can perpetuate self-serving myths;
- they can hide behind specious arguments (narrow constructions of “academic freedom,” *force majeure*, and the like);
- they can displace responsibilities (and blame others);
- they can fail the “stewardship test” (for example by not assessing and responding to risk, or by cutting corners, or by “letting go”);
- they can be bad neighbours; and, above all,
- they can fail to tell the truth to themselves as easily as failing to tell truth to power.

Meanwhile *second order engagement* is generally structured and mediated more by contracts. In this domain the university will:

- produce graduates in required disciplines and professional areas (whether directly or indirectly required to do so);
- respond to perceived needs for particular skills, for professional updating, or to more general consumer demand for courses in particular subjects;
- supply services, research and development, consultancy etc., at either a subsidised or a “for-profit” rate (until recently the university itself often didn’t know which was which);
- run subsidiary businesses – some as “spin-outs” or joint ventures, others in the “service” sector of entertainment, catering, conference or hotel facilities.

Also in this domain the university will often be a very important local and regional economic player. It supplies:

- employment – from unskilled occupations to the very skilled;
- an expanded consumer base, as students and staff are attracted to the institution and its locality;
- a steady, well-indemnified customer for goods and services;
- “development” in a myriad of fields, such as environmental improvements, buildings, amenities, office space, along with some downsides, like controversy over planning, car-parking, congestion or “studentification.”

The first domain affects the second in some complex and significant ways. The university, as a kind of moral force is expected to behave better than other large organisations (which are similarly concerned about the bottom line).

Some of these cross-over effects are mild: if the university didn’t pay its bills on time the community would be shocked, if the local hotel did the same thing they would shrug their shoulders. Others are economically more serious. In major partnerships, on which perhaps millions of pounds rest, you will rarely if ever see the university walk away from a done deal. Meanwhile the commercial partner can do so with apparent impunity, citing the business cycle, a change of management or policy, or simply “market forces.” (The saga of Jarvis in the UK university sector provides a cautionary tale; foundering in the end on a classic case of pyramid selling: the latest deal only working when financed by the next.)

Partnerships entered into by universities are thereby inherently unequal and in that sense unfair. To say so is not to cry crocodile tears: the university can gain major reputational and practical assets from its first order relationship with the community which, so long as this remains true, can outweigh these downsides. Partnership itself thus throws up some interesting dilemmas, including:

- leading and following (and occasionally having to do both simultaneously);

- dissolving, renewing and replacing partnership structures and deals, as circumstances change (when this is fudged, the result is often a confusing mixture of new and not-quite-killed-off arrangements, that cause frustration and waste of effort);
- moral *versus* strict constructionist views of contracts (as alluded to above);
- the expectations of some partnering groups in the community (particularly voluntary and community-service organisations) that the university has been put there (by local or central government) to serve *their* needs;
- the issue of relative reputational risk (again as alluded to above); and
- the issue of continuity - above all there is the fact that corporate change (mergers, acquisitions and the like) are much less frequent in the university than the corporate (and perhaps even the voluntary sector) – with some notable exceptions.

All of this means is that in difficult circumstances the university is likely be left holding the ring, and should expect to do so.

A promising way into understanding the dynamics of partnership is through the concept of the *stakeholder*, probably Margaret Thatcher’s most influential (and most slippery) legacy to Tony Blair and New Labour. A rigorous “stakeholder analysis” from the perspective of the university would throw up some surprising results.

- Whose are the stakes on the table (really) in the sense of sharing risk?
- Who can most effectively (i.e. legitimately as well as logically) claim to hold the “third party” stake (the celebrated “people’s money”) on behalf of the community as a whole? The politicians would like to claim it is theirs – through democratic validation – although the effect of such violent swings, shifts and reversals of policy as they employ in public education degrades this trust empirically.
- Is there in fact an inverse ratio of shared risk and rabble-raising, of nurture and noise? I know, for example, that the NHS is one of our major stake-holders. I’m not so sure about the CBI or the IoD.

And so, if universities are to make a steady and a positive contribution to their communities, the key holistic concept, and an essential backdrop for questions of leadership and management, has to be the rather old-fashioned notion of *stewardship*, of both the intellectual and moral as well as the concrete and practical assets of the university itself. Who is ultimately responsible for the security, the ongoing contribution and the performance of the university?

The simplest answer to this question is the university itself, through its *governance*. The governing body is straightforwardly responsible for:

- safeguarding the assets (including setting the budget);
- setting the strategy (often called “character and mission”); and
- employing and admitting the members (in the case of students through delegation to the Senate or Academic Board).

But sometimes these perspectives can be too narrow, especially if they are permanently refracted through the lens of institutional survival. There is a wider social interest in the higher education enterprise (essential to the “first order” relationships I set out before), for which governors ought also to feel responsible. This can mean not being too precious (or too competitive) about boundaries, about status, or about the reputational risk of association with other institutions in the sector. *Autonomy* is important, and a source of strength, but it does not apply in a vacuum; it should not be used as an excuse for pushing others around, and it should be used to serve the sector as well as the single institution.

Who else is responsible for this wider *public interest*?

- It can be government, although there are dangers there (the university is exactly not the sort of institution to be enlisted in a national crusade).
- It could be funders (especially through the peculiar agency of the “buffer body,” although genuinely to be one such the body has to be both capable of and seen to be facing both ways).

- For reasons set out above, it's unlikely to be the less entailed but none the less self-declared "stakeholders" (the self-interest and the selfish bottom line are just too powerful here).
- It used to be benefactors (and more generalised well-wishers), and it could be again.

A lot of this issues into the general question of *public confidence*. Does the society have a system of post-compulsory education about which the community feels confident, well served and affectionate? The answer in the UK has to be "not yet."

Twenty-first century dilemmas

So where are we now? On the face of things, such priorities *are* recognised in public discourse. The HEFCE has added a strategic priority in its latest consultation, about "securing the public interest." Hats were tipped in this direction by both the Lambert Report and the Government's response in the *Science and Innovation Strategy, 2004-14*. "Third leg" initiatives are all supposed to acknowledge the community interest, as in HEROBAC, HEIF and the "business and community" interaction survey. There are, however, two key sticking-points, which we in the UK have still to find our way around or through: in brutal summary these are *measurement* and *funding*.

The search for secure, comparable metrics for positive university-community interaction has become a little like the search for the Holy Grail. There are some candidates out there, but they all seem to have flaws: for example, by measuring activity rather than impact; by being susceptible to data manipulation or capture by idiosyncratic institutional interest; or even by reverting to "compensatory" entitlement (we don't do much research or direct business service, so we must be good at supporting the community.) They also fall down when institutions – as the best of them do – strategically cooperate to serve a particular community.

The "activities" which can be measured include volunteering, service learning, community-related R&D and consultancy, provision of facilities, cultural programmes, and so on... If you want metrics, we can certainly deliver them. A good example is sport, where a recent survey showed in one year nearly 30 million individual visits by members of the public to HEI sports facilities, and the availability of those facilities (which, of course simultaneously sustain education, training and research) to the public for about 70% of the times during which they are open. What they will rarely do, however, is supply the kind of fine-grained differentiation between individual institutional performance that equates to the RAE.

However, in this age of accountability, audit and atrophied trust in public institutions, it's clear that metrics and public money go together. So where else can universities and their community partners look? The resources of the community groups themselves are very limited, and likely to become more so as result of the latest wave of central undermining of local authority finances. Both government and business contracts are now dominated by the drive for full economic costing, and no more; so the creation of "socially useful" surpluses is less and less an option for institutions. This can also lead to a strange balance of power between the three parts of the resulting triangle. I heard this described in an extreme form by Derek Schwartz, Vice-Chancellor of Fort Hare University, in an Africa Educational Trust lecture at SOAS (10 October 2005). Because NGOs in South Africa are no longer directly funded, they look to the university for help. Because the university is not funded to help them, it seeks to maximise its more commercial contracts. It is, however, unable to create any serious surplus for re-investment from these. Listening to Schwartz, I was reminded of the famous *Frost Report* sketch on "the class system" (much re-played recently following the death of Ronnie Barker).

- "I am industry (Cleese), and I look down on him (the university), because he should do what I want."
- "I am the university (Barker) and I look up to him (industry), because he has money, some of which I need. I look down on him (the voluntary and community sector) because he has no money."
- "I am the community (Corbett) and I look up to him (the university) not only because he says he is my friend, but because he has money, some of which I need."

Something like his syndrome can also apply in the UK, if we are not careful..

Private philanthropy *is* an option (for example, it played a decisive role in the establishment of the University of Brighton's pioneering Community-University Partnership Project [CUPP), but leads to the additional strains of permanent fund-raising (with the usual concomitants of temporary staffing and permanent insecurity).

The inescapable dilemma is that community-university interaction is going to be even less structured around the linear model of knowledge transfer and exchange than university-business interaction. To work well, in twenty-first century conditions, it is going to be dependent on what William James called "a blooming, buzzing confusion" of dialogue on in the increasingly permeable boundary between modern universities and their communities. Messages will go both ways. There will be abortive as well as highly successful projects (this is a riskier domain than designing a better mouse-trap [another American philosophical reference]). Circumstances and conditions will change. But, if we are going to have higher education playing a fully engaged role in today's civil society, we are going to have to make this work.

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