

THE IDEA OF A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

This is an important forum, discussing a significant aspect of the modern university, but without being disrespectful (and because most other contributions are likely to be specifically directed to the region) I want to make some comments today about the rationale and role of a university in society generally, irrespective of its location. Hence my title - which is obviously adapted from that which J H Newman gave to his seminal discussions on the nature of a university more than a century ago - a work which I venture to suggest has been more quoted and less read than most. In particular I want to remind that universities have an intrinsic and time-honoured rationale or defining feature, which may without undue imprecision be characterized (in the words of Michael Oakeshott) as "a place for the pursuit of learning". The more especially, I want also to assert the importance of maintaining this defining feature of a university, which has survived the onslaught of utilitarians for centuries, as fundamental, whatever additional tasks and responsibilities may be added. And in this context I feel bound to assert that regional engagement, which is certainly highly desirable in a regional centre nowadays, is one of a number of novelties that have been adopted by universities as they have been drawn from the periphery of society to its very centre and constrained to extend their activities well beyond the purely academic.

Universities obviously have had a long history, and over the last four centuries or so that history has encompassed massive dispute and massive change, mostly from within. In the last twenty-five years or so, however, reflecting the new, and intensely public, position of universities in society, change has been very much more rapid and it has been largely imposed by government (whether directly or indirectly); it has also frequently resulted from political rather than academic considerations. In general terms a key battleground for centuries has been the role or mission of the university - whether it is to provide an educational experience (liberal education), to serve as a passport to useful employment (utility) or to undertake both tasks. Until recently the advocates of utility, despite their incessant clamour, have been effectively worsted, or at least neutralized - but lately a distinctly utilitarian viewpoint has begun to prevail, as instanced by frequent Ministerial broadsides and sundry newspaper editorials, castigating universities for not training students adequately for the workforce - and I suspect that many in society take such a view for granted or even as self-evident.

Two particular changes have entrenched this attitude. Firstly admission to university has been broadened and set upon a more equitable basis and the number of universities has grown enormously to accommodate the increasing student numbers. Hitherto, and certainly as recently as the 1950s, universities were few in number and very much the preserve of the wealthy, and I would argue that the close association of so-called "liberal education" with this type of university has exacerbated the problem of defending universities currently as even in part "places for the pursuit of learning". And things have not been helped by such embittered commentators as Somerset Maugham who (in 1955) opined*"I am told that today rather more than 60% of [those] who go to universities go on a government grant. This is a new class that has entered upon the scene..... They are scum"* As one of the scum, I do hope that modern exponents of universities as focal points for "liberal learning" have demitted such patrician attitudes - though I do still see as relevant the question whether there should be a limit to the percentage of the undergraduate population if universities are to maintain effective standards, especially in highly vocational areas.

Secondly, of course, the massive increase in student participation was only possible with government support; and, unsurprisingly, such support has been accompanied by intervention. Currently, even though the financial support has diminished, the intervention has not, and universities now have many new impositions to distract staff and divert funds from teaching and research, including onerous reporting requirements in respect of governance, quality, commercial activity, audits and so on. A particular obsession now is the need to publish strategic plans and mission statements - something that was not so long ago regarded with derision, as witness (for example) the comments of Michael Oakeshott, who asserted: *"One of the criticisms of contemporary universities is that they are not as clear as they ought to be about their "function". I am not at all surprised. There is plenty that might properly be*

criticized in our universities, but to quarrel with them because they are not clear about their "function" is to make a mistake about their character. A university is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity. And it would be necessary for a university to advertise itself as pursuing a particular purpose only if it were talking to people so ignorant that they had to be spoken to in baby-language, or if it were so little confident of its power to embrace those who came to it that it had to call attention to its incidental charms".

He went on to say, what could certainly not be affirmed today,*"My impression is that our universities have not yet sunk so low as to make this necessary"*. Little did he know! For this last comment is already so far wide of the mark that universities now experience criticism for not expending enough resources on self-advertisement, never mind not having a suitable strategic plan.

As I have already said, the key struggle in universities (in the British and hence the Australian tradition) over recent centuries has essentially been over their role - whether it is educational (ie. to provide training for the mind or the intellect) or whether it is utilitarian (ie. to provide training for a profession or vocation). It seems to me that this is a false dichotomy and that a sensible blend of the two is desirable. Indeed, as I shall mention shortly, just such a blend has emerged in the course of the 20th century - but it threatens to be evanescent since utility has for the first time been put into a pre-eminent position by the introduction and overweening popularity of many subjects which are almost exclusively vocational in nature and which clearly do not represent a "branch of study" so much as a course of training for a profession. Hitherto, of course, such training took place outside of universities. In the current environment an efflorescence of vocational programs in universities is inevitable, indeed desirable, but the danger is that, after a century or so in which education and utility had begun to find a fruitful *modus vivendi*, the effect may well be to marginalize and perhaps eventually to eradicate the former - effectively converting a university to a training factory. Such a process is particularly likely in the case of regional institutions or campuses, which in Australia for the most part are relatively small, relatively new and for the most part relatively deficient in infrastructure - [And I note here, but have no time to elaborate, that the concept of a regional institution in Australia is rather different from that in most other parts of the world. Compare (say) Spain or the UK, where examples of regional universities would be Santiago de Compostela or Lancaster respectively - one old, one the same age as La Trobe University - but both are largely set in major cities of a large region, and endowed with the attributes of a major metropolitan university - very much in contrast to Australian examples]. But I want to assert that the Idea of a Regional University, even if it is new and small, should not differ in any essential way from the Idea of a University generally. In other words it should exhibit the same core attributes that define any university, whilst of course maintaining additional features appropriate to its location and social setting. And in this regard I suspect that I would be advocating a model not dissimilar to that depicted most eloquently by Professor Rhett Walker in his recent Worner Lecture in Bendigo.

The critical issue, of course, is to define the attributes of the modern university. Obviously it is no longer possible to have recourse to the vague description provided by Oakeshott, and an institution exclusively devoted to liberal education (such as that adumbrated by Newman) is equally unacceptable, not the least because it would surely not attract sufficient students. But it is surely reprehensible (if not disgraceful for a developed country with a long tradition of excellent university education) to countenance what is increasingly being advocated, namely that the university should become a training factory.

After some 400 years of resistance to an exclusively functional university the prospect of just such an institution looms. So it is no surprise that those who fear such a transformation hark back to J H Newman, whose work "The Idea of a University" was specifically written to fend off contemporary pressure for the supersession of liberal education in general and of Classics in particular by useful subjects. As the critics querulously proclaimed : - *".....what other measure is there of dignity in intellectual labour but usefulness? And what ought the term University to mean, but a place where every science is taught which is liberal and at the same time useful to mankind?Real utility [is] our guide"*. As Newman pointed out, the critics were hardly pioneers. Their sentiments had already been expressed with greater lucidity and ferocity by

the famous philosopher John Locke, himself an Oxford Don briefly in the 1660s - and I cite for interest an example of his diatribes.

" 'Tis matter of astonishment that men of quality and parts should suffer themselves to be so far misled by custom and implicit faith. Reason, if consulted with, would advise, that their children's time should be spent in acquiring what might be useful to them, when they come to be men, rather than that their heads should be stuffed with a deal of trash, a great part whereof they usually never do ('tis certain they never need to) think on again as long as they live; and so much of it as does stick by them they are only the worse for."

Again - (attacking the prevalent Latin tradition at Oxford)

*"Can there be anything more ridiculous, than that a father should waste his own money, and his son's time, in setting him to **learn the Roman language**, when at the same time he **designs him for a trade**, wherein he, having no use of Latin, fails not to forget that little which he brought from school, and which 'tis ten to one he abhors for the ill-usage it procured him? Could it be believed, unless we have everywhere amongst us examples of it, that a child should be forced to learn the rudiments of a language, which **he is never to use in the course of life that he is designed to**, and neglect all the while the writing a good hand, and casting accounts, which are of great advantage in all conditions of life, and to most trades indispensably necessary?"*

A view of university education that would doubtless strike a chord with only too many today.

The riposte of Newman is, of course, desperately anachronistic in many ways - and partisans often forget, omit, or are ignorant of the stifling religious environment in which it was written - for example, in 1811 the poet Shelley had his potentially flamboyant career at Oxford cut short by expulsion after he published an undergraduate piece entitled "The Necessity of Atheism", and in 1875 William Hardinge, a student friend of Oscar Wilde, was sent down for "keeping and reciting immoral poetry" (ie. poetry capable of being interpreted as of a homosexual nature). Oxford and Cambridge were also far from idyllic havens of scholarship in his day - standards were lax, most students and staff spent little time in the pursuit of learning, and nepotism was rife. Thus (eg) the great historian Gibbon left Magdalen College, Oxford (in 1752) after a brief sojourn complaining that his years there "were the most idle and unprofitable 14 months of my life"; in 1808 Lord Byron acquired his MA from Cambridge without examination, after three years of leisure (the nobility automatically qualifying for a degree without examination); earlier he had put his pet bear up for election as a College Fellow to illustrate the vagaries of current selection procedures; and later he commented "*study is the last pursuit of the society; the Master eats, drinks and sleeps, the Fellows drink, dispute and pun, and the employments of the undergraduates you will probably conjecture without my description*" - a massive array of contemporary evidence bears out this general picture of bibulous sloth.

So Newman had a formidable task in defending liberal education. None the less his work is an inspiring defence of the idea of a university as a centre for the pursuit of learning or, as he styles it, "*a place of teaching universal knowledge*". Where it is discordant with modern times is in its failure (understandable at the time) to see that pure education alone could not sustain a university once admission transcended a patrician and wealthy few.

It was not long after the final edition of Newman's work (in 1873) that there came the key transformation, which saw the diversification of the Humanities from its narrow pre-occupation with Classics and the introduction of the Sciences, hitherto grossly neglected. One of the great catalysts for the change was the scientist, Thomas Huxley who argued strenuously for the introduction of science and social science and for greater diversity in the Humanities. The revolution that he stimulated was not swiftly achieved (and Classics at Oxford, for instance, did not lose its supremacy until the 1960s - just after I graduated therein!), and in reality it was not so much a promotion of utility as of diversity - but by the middle of the 20th century a wide-ranging syllabus encompassing many branches of study (including numerous utilitarian fields) had become the norm for universities. A threat to this felicitous blend has emerged in the latter part of the 20th century where the introduction of many frankly vocational subjects has brought with it a vigorous renewal of the gospel of utility. And in many countries, notably the Soviet Union and China, this witnessed the development of specialist institutes and

universities. Interestingly, in China at any rate recognition of the intellectual poverty of exclusively functional universities has dawned and almost all are now being converted to comprehensive institutions - something we would do well to ponder before taking the fatal plunge.

Only a fool would nowadays dispute the desirability of utilitarian fields in modern universities, and the challenge surely is to ensure that their introduction does not subvert the idea of a university as a centre for learning. To use the vivid terminology of Oakeshott" *The problem of the universities today is how to avoid destruction at the hand of [those] who have no use for their characteristic virtues who are convinced only that "knowledge is power".*

To conclude: the search for an adequate definition of a university today is best not linked directly, and certainly not exclusively, to the ideas of Newman. The importance of his contribution has been to identify and defend the traditional and indispensable core of a university. But the real founder of the modern university was surely Huxley, who argued for breadth and diversity - in other words to build on the core. The recent move to essentially public universities with broad and relatively transparent criteria for admission [alien concepts certainly to Newman and probably to Huxley and Oakeshott too], with a strong suite of vocational programs, and very recently in Australia the experiment of taking higher education to regional centres rather than bringing regional students to the metropolis, can all be encompassed within such a broad vision.

In an age dominated by technology and economic rationalism, the traditional role of the university is difficult to sustain - and even the pure sciences are endangered. The remedy is not to indulge in Newmanesque ululations of horror, but to argue persuasively with Huxley for a blend of the traditional and the utilitarian on the grounds that society needs intellectuals and intelligent citizens as well as experts in specific fields; and that universities should enrich society as a whole, not just the work-related aspects.

At La Trobe University - to be parochial - we are seeking to pursue this blend and it figures as a defining feature of the University. As a strong regional provider it is our hope, and aspiration, that such an Idea of a University encompasses also the Idea of a Regional University. In other words in their efforts to play an appropriately regional role the regional university campuses should not lose sight of the core feature of a genuine university, namely the pursuit of learning. The community has a right to expect the University to respect and promote local aspirations; by the same token the community should recognise that a university has, and needs to retain, certain attributes in terms of the pursuit of learning if it is to deserve and keep the title of University. In this sense there is no need for the Idea of a Regional University - only for the Idea of a University.

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