

# **SYMPOSIUM ON THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY IN THE 1990s**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the centenary year of Cardinal Newman's death and when universities and higher education are under widespread and critical appraisal it is fitting and timely that the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland with its long and distinguished history should hold a symposium on this subject. It is a great privilege to take part in it.

## **2. UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Universities and more broadly higher education in the United Kingdom have had much public attention in the 1980s. Government and more particularly certain ministers have been highly critical and even abrasive in their comments on universities. At the same time universities have often evinced an undisguised antipathy towards government. In short the relationship between universities and governments has been poor and hardly in the best interests of either party!

The 1985 Green Paper "The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s" stated under the heading "The Government's Main Concerns" that:

The economic performance of the United Kingdom since 1945 has been disappointing compared to the achievements of others. The Government believes that it is vital for our higher education to contribute more effectively to the improvement of the performance of the economy. This is not because the Government places a low value on the general cultural benefits of education and research. Nor does it place a low value on

the study of the humanities which, provided that high academic standards are applied, enriches the lives of students, helps to set the moral and social framework of our society, and prepares students for many types of employment. The reason is simply that, unless the country's economic performance improves, we shall be even less able than now to afford many of the things that we value most - including education for pleasure and general culture and the financing of scholarship and research as an end in itself<sup>1</sup>.

The emphasis is evident: higher education is seen primarily as a means to enhance economic performance. Little more than lip-service is paid to the humanities, their relevance to enriching students' lives and to setting the moral and social framework of society.

Government reinforced this emphasis some two years later in the 1987 White Paper "Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge".

In higher education itself there is a need to pursue reforms, both in the management and funding of the system and in the monitoring and quality of its work, so that we can build on areas of excellence in the arts and sciences. But above all there is an urgent need, in the interests of the nation as a whole, and therefore of universities, polytechnics and colleges themselves, for higher education to take increasing account of the economic requirements of the country.

The achievement of greater commercial and industrial relevance in higher education activity depends much on close communication between academic staff and people in business at all levels, often but not exclusively on a local basis. These connections can lead to more suitable teaching, to research and technology transfer, and on occasions to help with equipment or finance. They also help foster the positive attitudes to enterprise which are crucial for both institutions and their students<sup>2</sup>.

This approach has set the agenda for universities and more broadly higher

education in Britain in the 1990s. The University Grants Committee, formerly seen as a bulwark between government and universities and as a means of protecting their relative autonomy, has been replaced by a Universities Funding Council (UFC) with strong representation of non-academic, mainly business, members and with government having a reserve power to issue directions to the Council. Financial relationships between the Council and the universities are governed by memoranda giving detailed powers of investigation and accountability to the former.

Increasingly universities are having to be managed and run on a commercial basis. They are being seen as service industries with three main "products", providers of courses, research and consultancy services. The UFC has issued guide prices for the provision of courses in specified subject areas and has invited universities to bid competitively, generally at or below the guide prices, for student numbers for the period 1991-92 to 1994-95. Failure to meet student number targets may result in demands by the UFC for repayment of funds.

Funding for research from the UFC is made to each university on the basis of an assessment of the quality and quantity of its research. In addition, research funds are provided by the research councils, partly for areas which they consider should have priority in research development, partly in response to submitted proposals. Universities are also encouraged to seek commissioned research from business, government and others and similarly for consultancy work. A key motivation is that universities should increase the proportion of their funds which come from sources other than government grants. It should thus come as no surprise that the careful costing and pricing of course provision, research and consultancy have become central to university management. The watchwords have become effectiveness in pursuit of well specified objectives, economy in carrying out purchases and efficiency in resource management. The language of enterprise, marketing and, implicitly, profit and loss are steadily becoming the vocabulary of university management.

### 3. UTILITARIANISM OR REALISM?

It is tempting to dismiss much of the foregoing as vulgar utilitarianism or crass materialism and indeed there may be a certain justice in so doing. The sweeping generalisations of both the Green and White papers are vulgar in their implicit claim to certain knowledge; and the concentration on economic performance as apparently the main justification of higher education smacks of crude materialism. But it should not be forgotten that higher education has become a mass phenomenon imposing heavy costs on the generality of tax payers.

In the UK currently there are about 1 million full-time and part-time students and the public cost of higher education is some £5 billion or about 1 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. No government that takes seriously accountability to the tax payer can dismiss this scale of expenditure or ignore what benefits it is likely to bring to society. And the point is reinforced by the expectation that the numbers involved in higher education will increase substantially in the years ahead. It is clearly not fortuitous that government is wrestling with the problem of how it might share with individuals and the private sector generally the costs of higher education, partly on the grounds that the recipients of higher education on the average benefit considerably from enhanced earning prospects.

The emphasis on cost is also relevant to the importance attached by government to the internal management of universities and higher education generally. There was and perhaps is a suspicion that universities are at least casual in their management of resources, at worst are producers' co-operatives, directing their activities in the interests of the producer rather than the main clientele, the student. It is also argued that much research is based on what appeals to academic peers, rather than on what benefits it might bring to society, and is more important than teaching. It is, of course, easy to caricature university practices and to be grossly unfair to many dedicated academic staff but it behoves universities to be aware of how they are viewed.

It must also be realised that in a world where economic power may be of fundamental importance for the protection of reasonable national interests and the survival of a distinctive culture and identity, relative economic performance may have profound significance. In so far as the dissemination

and practical application of scientific and technological knowledge is a factor in this then universities should expect that their activities will fall under public scrutiny. But to have conceded all of this is not to accept uncritically the pronouncements and policies of government. There is more to university education and to the life of the individual and society than the utilitarian or a narrow economic realism.

#### 4. NEWMAN'S VERDICT

For Newman the fundamental purpose of a university was the cultivation of intellect. For him "a truly great intellect ... is one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these one on another; without which there is no whole, and no centre. It possesses the knowledge, not only of things, but also of their mutual and true relations; knowledge, not merely considered as acquirement, but as philosophy"<sup>3</sup>.

It should not be inferred from this that Newman was opposed to what he called professional or scientific knowledge, though he was opposed to them "as the sufficient end of a University Education". He continues,

let me not be supposed, Gentlemen, to be disrespectful towards particular studies, or arts, or vocations, and those who are engaged in them. In saying that Law or Medicine is not the end of a University course, I do not mean to imply that the University does not teach Law or Medicine. What indeed can it teach at all, if it does not teach something particular? It teaches *all* knowledge by teaching all *branches* of knowledge, and in no other way. I do but say that there will be this distinction as regards a Professor of Law, or of Medicine, or of Geology, or of Political Economy, in a University and out of it, that out of a University he is in danger of being absorbed and narrowed by his pursuit, and of giving Lectures which are the Lectures of nothing more than a lawyer, physician, geologist, or political economist; whereas in a University he will just know where he and his science stand, he has come to it, as it were, from a height, he has taken a survey of all knowledge, he is kept from extravagance by the very rivalry of other studies, he

has gained from them a special illumination and largeness of mind and freedom and self-possession, and he treats his own in consequence with a philosophy and a resource, which belongs not to the study itself, but to his liberal education<sup>4</sup>.

It may be that this has an idealised ring to it in a world of mass higher education which requires in the United Kingdom alone some 80,000 academic staff. But if we dismiss it out of hand may we not have lost something of enormous value? How many of us who are involved in higher education can be entirely satisfied with the relative isolation and apparent separation of the different disciplines and areas of professional studies? or be reassured by what often seems to be a positivistic and supposedly value free approach to the pursuit of knowledge and an unquestioning acceptance of current fashions on many consequential policy issues? If this is correct or partly so does it suggest at the heart of much higher education there is a kind of vacuum and that this may entail serious dangers?

Yet even if this is so it does not follow that the vision of Newman provides clear answers for to-day's world and large scale higher education system. In the end his vision was grounded in a view of the world and the universe which for good or ill has largely passed. His certainties cannot be ours or at least not universally so. Our university world has still to find its loadstar and rediscover or reformulate its basic values and purposes.

But, notwithstanding this, no doubt, controversial conclusion, Newman's majestic vision remains to haunt us.

The Philosopher ... and the man of the world differ in their very notion, but the methods, by which they are respectively formed, are pretty much the same. The Philosopher has the same command of matters of thought, which the true citizen and gentleman has of matters of business and conduct. If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end fitness for the world ... a University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at

supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant<sup>5</sup>.

## References

1. **Cmnd 9524, 1985.** p. 3, London, HMSO.
2. **Cm 114, 1987.** p.12, London, HMSO.
3. **J.H. Newman.** *The Idea of a University, Discourse VI*, edited by M.J. Svaglic, 1960, p.101, Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
4. **Ibid, *Discourse VII***, p.126.
5. **Ibid**, pp.134-145.

## DISCUSSION

R. Fox: An important consideration in relation to higher education in Ireland over the next decade is the Single European Market. The question of the appropriate funding structure for higher education must surely be affected by the large labour market flows within the "new" Europe.

The large element of State funding of Irish higher education can be justified in principle on grounds of equity or efficiency. But most commentators would not regard the funding system of Irish higher education to be justified on equity grounds. The studies by Clancy, Hannon and others have shown that the Irish higher education system largely benefits the better-off sections of society at the expense of the broad mass of taxpayers. It leads, also, to a re-distribution from non-participants to HE participants. In this respect the Irish experience mirrors that in many other countries, both developed and underdeveloped, where any idea that HE is socially equitable has long since been abandoned.

The argument for State funding of HE must, therefore, be on economic efficiency grounds, primarily on the basis of there being major externalities. I am not aware of any evidence that such major externalities exist, but it is clear that large-scale emigration must reduce them considerably. Ireland has suffered large-scale emigration in the 1980's and, as a recent FAS survey showed, this has been greatest among the most educated groups. Thus, it is certain that the social return to HE has been much reduced over the last decade because of this and there is reason to believe that the 1990's will continue this pattern.

Briefly, the main grounds for expecting continued high levels of emigration are the increased ease of labour market flows between EC countries because of '1992' developments in the areas of:

mutual recognition of higher education diplomas, improved language skills supported by programmes such as LINGUA, easier access to public sector jobs in other Member States and the increased flow of HE students consequent on programmes such as ERASMUS. In addition, the demographic situation in the EC, whereby the major economies will face shortages of young people, will lead to a strong pull to attract the HE graduates of countries such as Ireland.

Faced with this prospect it would seem desirable to reduce the national subsidy to all or some HE students. I will not discuss whether this should be done through a greater use of loans, graduate taxes or greater fees, or a mixture of these methods. But, such a reduction in the national subsidy could be combined with increased funding from the EC if it was agreed that significant externalities were being obtained in the EC as a whole. This is the approach implicitly suggested in the recent NESC report on the Single European Market where it is argued that theories of centre-region relationships lead to a view that the funding of education in the face of major externalities between regions may be validly undertaken centrally. These questions need to be explored further in an attempt to measure the possible magnitudes involved and hence develop appropriate policies for Irish higher education funding.