

EDUCATION AND SOCIETY | LECTURE NO. 1

# The Kantian University: Worldwide triumph and growing insecurity

Simon Marginson



**Ollscoil na hÉireann**  
National University of Ireland



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EDUCATION AND SOCIETY | LECTURE NO. 1

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Dr Maurice Manning, Chancellor of NUI, Professor Simon Marginson, Dr Attracta Halpin, Registrar of NUI and Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Registrar and Deputy President of Maynooth University



Professor Simon Marginson and Professor Patrick Clancy

# OPENING REMARKS



As Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, I am delighted to welcome you all here this evening for this lecture by Professor Simon Marginson. We are honoured to have Professor Simon Marginson in Dublin, to discuss with us his research, and his views, on how the modern-day university has evolved, the role it is now playing in our society and where it may be headed next.

International scholars in the study of Higher Education are few and far between and Simon has been a leading light in this space for some years. We in Ireland hear much today about the challenges facing our universities and colleges as student numbers grow, research becomes ever more competitive on a world-scale and public monies ever more scarce. It is important therefore to take time to reflect on the bigger picture globally and from an historic perspective. Simon's contribution supports us in doing that.

I would also like to welcome Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Vice-President Academic, Registrar and Deputy President at Maynooth University. He will respond to Professor Marginson's lecture and will reflect on the phenomenal transformation of the Irish university sector and the impact this has had on our economy, our society and our ways of thinking.

With such expertise and experience, we can expect a thought provoking analysis this evening and I look forward to an interesting discussion in response to both speakers.

**Dr Maurice Manning**  
Chancellor of the University

Dr Maurice Manning, Chancellor of NUI, Professor Patrick Clancy, UCD, Professor Simon Marginson, and Dr Attracta Halpin, Registrar of NUI



# THE KANTIAN UNIVERSITY: WORLDWIDE TRIUMPH AND GROWING INSECURITY<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

How might we think about that institution called ‘the University’? At home and across the world? For something like the institution we know is now found in every part of the world.

We might start with the National University of Ireland. In 1845 the Queen’s College Act established constituent colleges in Cork, Galway and Belfast. In 1851 John Henry Newman was made the first rector of the Catholic University. It was independent of the coloniser-state. At first the new University was blocked from granting degrees but in 1882 it became University College Dublin (UCD); and in 1908 UCD, Cork and Galway were federated in the National University of Ireland. Then these universities, like their counterparts elsewhere, began their long ascent to the peak of society. UCD alone now has 33,724 students. It is a global university. And it grants degrees. In the most recent year there were 8857 awards.

Yet in a fashion the small beleaguered founding Catholic University still resonates, it is still with us. Its influence too is global. In 1852 Newman delivered the first lectures that became *The Idea of a University* (Newman, 1982). Newman’s model of institution was born in Dublin. There could not be a better place for tonight’s lecture.

This paper discusses the University as an institution in three parts. It moves from the abstract to the concrete. I begin with the University as a social form or type. What it is. Its inner motors. What holds it together. And its outer drivers. What holds it in society. This first part of the paper is much the longest. The second part remarks on tendencies in the university in which we live, the contemporary university. The third and final part discusses limits and problems of the University. It is called ‘The insecurities of the University’.



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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first delivered as an evening lecture to the National University of Ireland in Dublin, on 7 November 2018. Thank you to Patricia Maguire from NUI and to the participant audience for stimulating discussion.

## 1. The University as a social form

There is much written about the University as a social form. Yet I think there are only three great 'Ideas' of the University. One is Newman's Idea. The second, which preceded Newman in time but is more modern, is the German Idea of Kant and von Humboldt. The third is the American research university idea, the successor to the German Idea. The American Idea, carried by institutions of great distinction and massive science and normalised by global connections, globally visible exemplars and global rankings, is the dominant model today.

### Three Ideas of the University

Newman's Idea and the American Idea have each been summarised in a brilliant book (Newman, 1982; Kerr, 2001). The German Idea must be gleaned from a larger body of works and practices. But I think the German Idea it is the most original and influential. It is the pivotal moment.

**John Henry Newman.** Newman is obsolete. Yet Newman is ever-present. His invocations against vocational utility, and against research in the University, are no longer persuasive. But Newman did not set himself against knowledge as such. Newman's pellucid vision of teaching and learning, expressed in prose never equalled, was of personal development immersed in diverse knowledge. He told us that knowledge and truth are not just means but ends. 'A University', says Newman, 'taken in its bare idea... has this object and this mission; it contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture, here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this. it educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it' (Newman, 1982, pp. 94-95).

Learning is also good for students. 'The knowledge which is thus acquired', says Newman, 'expands and enlarges the mind, excites its faculties, and calls those limbs and muscles into freer exercise' (Newman, 1982, p. 128). And it is good for everyone. 'If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say that it is of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world'(Newman, 1982, p. 134). Newman's Idea is no longer enough. Yet the positive vision is right in itself. Newman's Idea is still at the heart of the University today.

**Immanuel Kant and Wilhelm von Humboldt.** Meanwhile, something similar and also different had emerged in Germany. There, student development through immersion in knowledge was joined to a larger social picture. Knowledge itself was also seen as developing, and this became another function of the University. Further, by cultivating reason in students, education did not just fit them for society, it transformed and improved society (Biesta, 2002, p. 345). This is Kantian enlightenment, in which the education of students in continuous self-formation, *Bildung*, is one of the drivers of modernity (Kivela, 2012). *Bildung* implies an education dedicated to the unbounded evolution of individual and collective human potential. Self-formation through education opens new horizons as it proceeds. The educability of the self-forming learner is continually expanding (Sijander, 2012, p. 94). Kant published his epochal essay *What is Enlightenment?* in 1784. Kant called on the public to enlighten itself, to use critical reason to interrogate the times in which it lived (Kant, 2009). Critical reason, he said, will not emerge naturally. It must be installed through education (Kivela, 2012, pp. 59-60).

Much was happening in 1784. In Vienna Mozart wrote his 17th piano concerto, K453 in G Major, his first great keyboard concerto. In London the young JMW Turner was beginning to draw. Five years later the French revolution began; in which the public, following Kant's advice, interrogated its times. After the revolution European states, which had been rocked to their base, could never return to the old regime. Their new ambition was to be modern and stable at the same time – to find ways to both augment the newly freed individual agency that has been revealed by the revolution and to harness that agency to the state. Wilhelm von Humboldt



took the Kantian Idea of Bildung, socially nested self-formation, into a new kind of University. We can call this the Kantian University. It became the modern European University, and then the world University of science and critical scholarship.

Von Humboldt's University of Berlin, founded in 1809, had a formative curriculum that was broad and deep, grounded in history, classical languages and literature, linguistics, science and research (Kirby and van der Wende, 2016, pp. 2-3). He wanted a university that would serve the state, but in the form of an autonomous institution with freedom to learn and to teach, *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit*. These ideas, with their inner tensions, became central to the German university and the American research university that followed. Across the world, faculty still defend their self-determination by invoking the global culture of the Humboldtian university (Sijander and Sutenin, 2012, p.15), though this is now more focused on the freedom of the academic than that of the student.

**Clark Kerr.** The American adaptation of the German university began with Johns Hopkins in 1876 and had spread to Harvard and the other Ivy League institutions by the early twentieth century. In another form it radiated via the land grant movement, with its un-Newmanlike service to agriculture, industry and government. In retrospect we see here the beginning of the triple helix (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1995), the third mission and the engaged university. After World War II and the Manhattan project, research flourished in the leading universities, while the United States became the first mass higher education system. Almost ninety years after Johns Hopkins, in 1963, University of California President Clark Kerr wrote the definitive account of the American research university, *The Uses of the University* (Kerr, 2001).

This is a beautiful book. Kerr's vision lacks the Internet and globalisation but otherwise remains definitive. It is more prosaic than Newman but Kerr has great clarity of mind and he takes in the whole University and polity, and part of society and economy as well. His main point was that the small elite university of Newman's time had grown into the large ever-growing 'multiversity'. The multiversity is multiple and diverse in missions, functions, sites, disciplines, students, inner interest groups and external stakeholders. This loosely coupled combinatory model is in

fact highly functional. Variable cross-subsidisation from teaching protects the non-economic character of research. Revenue shortfalls can be quarantined because of the part-decoupled character of functions. Kerr said that the multiversity had no single animating principle. He was not sure what held it together. He thought that it was probably not the university president, though it was apparent that administration was becoming more important. Rather, it might be its reputation, which he called its 'name' (Kerr, 2001, p.15) and a shared interest in itself. And its growing social uses, especially of its research.

Let's now fast forward to today. Can we improve on Clark Kerr's account? What are the main components of today's University and how do they hang together?

### The institution today: the Inner University

Let me attempt a simplified description of the University today, a model of the type of 1852 Newman, 1809 German or 1963 American type. The University of today combines three distinctive and essential elements. These elements are the corporate university, the self-forming student, and the knowledge-bearing, knowledge-creating faculty. Each element has agency in itself, each develops under its own power, in fact each has tremendous momentum on a social scale. They are also enmeshed with each other. Together they comprise what we can call the Inner University.

**The corporate institution.** First, the corporate institution qua institution, which is nested in local communities, national systems and global networks. The University as an institution, a distinct organisational type with autonomous volition.

The institution has the autonomy that von Humboldt was able to deploy because of its peculiar legal structure. This is the outcome of a fortunate historical accident. The foundational medieval European universities were incorporated institutions. Though they were outgrowths of the church, for the most part they were also established under the auspices of the state as semi-independent entities. Subject to the influence of both church and state, they were wholly controlled by neither (most of the time), and in the small space between church and state they could

pursue their own agendas. From this foundation they evolved as distinctive institutions with their own rituals, symbols, awards, and later their own knowledge-intensive missions. The partial autonomy of European universities made them different to the other pre-modern forms of higher education across the world. Their laws of motion were distinct from those of the scholarly Buddhist monasteries in India, and academies in Cairo and other Islamic cities, where religion dominated; and distinct from the academies in China, that trained scholar-officials for the state. Notably, none of these other kinds of institution evolved into a worldwide form with its own identity and habits.

Today, at first glance, the semi-independent corporate University slots into the familiar idea of the self-seeking business firm. The University is often seen as another business. Yes and no. There's more to it than that, and also less. The University is not primarily driven by profit or revenues, though many universities are busily ambitious for market share. Revenues are a means to the real end, which is social prestige, social status, and an expanding social role in the lives of families, communities and economies at home and abroad. Modern universities are driven to continually expand in size and function, to aggregate people, resources and status, as Clark Kerr noted. Each extension of mission and function brings with it growth in the professional staff for whom, unlike the faculty, the corporate institution looms larger than do the individual disciplines located within it.

**The self-forming student.** The second element that composes the modern University is the self-forming student (Marginson, 2018a), who is nested in the aspirational family (Cantwell, Marginson and Smolentseva, 2018, chapter 1). If some students might appear reluctant to form themselves through learning, the point is that all of the students are there, inside the University and (in this country at least) most of them will graduate.

Why? There are many different modes of self-formation and there is also a dominant mode. Some students want to acquire cultural capital and some want social networks. Some students want to immerse themselves in cultural performances or student politics. Some want to form a family by marrying another

student. Most students want to form themselves in more than one way at the same time. Many students want to immerse themselves in knowledge because for them knowledge is fulfilling in itself, as Newman said. In a sweeping study of ten thousand years of Eurasian history, the archaeologist Barry Cunliffe concluded that one of the two motives that distinguishes the human species is curiosity, the desire for information and understanding, the desire to know. Cunliffe's other distinguishing motivation is acquisitiveness (Cunliffe, 2015, p. 1). This is the desire for objects and for social status (sometimes derived from objects, sometimes more abstract). Newman did not discuss this. Adam Smith did. Adam Smith in 1776 called the desire for status and wealth the 'the desire of bettering our condition' (Smith, 1979, p. 441). The motivation of acquisitiveness feeds what is probably the most universal kind of self-formation in the University.

Nearly all students, regardless of the other kinds of self-formation in which they are engaged, whether they are enrolled in STEM, philosophy or business studies, want the credentials that universities bring. They want to form themselves in terms of earning power and/or social position. There is no end to the long-term growth of social demand for the opportunities associated with higher education. In some national systems, like South Korea and Finland, the school leaver participation rate now exceeds 90 per cent.

**The knowledge-making faculty.** The third element of the University is the knowledge-making faculty, nested in local, national and global scholarly communities. Higher education is not an easy industry in which to work as an academic, especially in the early years. For much of the career the rate of return on the PhD does not justify the investment and few reach the top. Many doctoral graduates simply cannot get faculty jobs, many are confined to a succession of hourly paid posts. Despite this large numbers of people want to work with codified academic knowledge and a high proportion want to create part of that knowledge. The agency of faculty cannot be primarily grounded in the employment relation because bright people can earn better money with more security elsewhere. They want to be faculty because this is a way of life they respect and desire. It is a vocation.

The explosive growth in the number of published papers around the world partly reflects growing national investments in science, in most countries, and the growing role of advanced knowledge in industry and government, both points that were made by Kerr. It also reflects the inducements implanted by university performance cultures. But I don't think these explanations are sufficient. Studies of scientific networks indicate that science is more cooperative than competitive; and grows primarily through bottom up and horizontal disciplinary cultures (for example, Wagner, Park and Leydesdorff, 2015). The collective faculty make knowledge because someone with power wants them to do so. They also make knowledge because it is their nature to do so, as a silkworm makes silk, as Marx said (Marx, 1979, p. 1044). Knowledge makes them and they make knowledge.

### **The University as a status economy**

In the University these three distinct kinds of agency, the institution, the students and the faculty, have evolved together. They are mutually supporting. This is especially apparent in the research-intensive university, which in most cases is a socially elite university, and where all three kinds of agency and their interdependencies have become highly developed. Functioning together, the three kinds of agency constitute a status producing economy.

Because student formation occurs through the immersion in knowledge, through the teaching-research nexus, faculty contribute both student formation and knowledge making, at the same time. Each of the students and the faculty then feed into the status of the corporate institution. First, there is mutual status building between elite self-forming students and the institution. By attracting high scoring students, universities enhance their own prestige. At the same time, elite universities confer prestige on graduates. There is an exchange of status between university and student. Second, knowledge making faculty build research university status; while at the same time elite research universities harbour top researchers, and provide them also with prestige. Again we see that faculty and institution are engaged in an exchange of status. There is a double exchange of status. And the two status exchanges are interactive, because knowledge building by faculty, while it enhances

the status of the institution, also enhances the attractiveness of the institution to elite students. In the interdependency between the three elements that comprise the Inner University, social status in different forms is both the currency and outcome of exchange.

The modern research University is a giant engine for producing and reproducing status. And I think it is this that holds it together. This is another Idea of a University, though it is not especially pretty. It is more a case of how the world works. Newman and von Humboldt did not see the University in terms of status. They took it for granted that in the small socially elite institution of the nineteenth century the social elite already had status. There was no mass pool of social rewards to differentiate and allocate across the population, as there is now. Kerr sensed that massification had changing that, but the full implications were not yet clear to him. He did grasp that the University's reputation, its name, helped to unify it (Kerr, 2001).

## Universal growth

I want to emphasise two more points about the three kinds of agency which together constitute today's University. First, the point that each form of agency – institution, students and faculty – is self-driven and self-developing. Each grows of its own volition. One is reminded of John Dewey, the American pragmatists, C.P. Mead, with their distinctive take on Kantian Bildung, their emphasis on the ubiquity of *growth* in and through education (Kivela, Sijander and Sutinen 2012, p. 307). At the same time, the growth of each, institution, student and faculty, provides favourable conditions for the growth of the others. This suggests that solely in terms of its inner workings, the University must expand its role and influence and resource usage over time. This includes its role as a status economy and the volume of social status that it manages.

The other point is that these three forms of agency have proven to be universalisable – or nearly so – on the world scale. The extent of similarity between universities, everywhere, though from differing national and cultural contexts, is often remarkable. This is why global rankings, despite their biases, omissions and inequalities, are superficially plausible. The corporate institution, led by a semi-

autonomous strategic executive, is a form that is now widely distributed, though the executive has varying steering power. On the faculty side, training regimes and career structures vary markedly between countries, but the actual work of faculty in teaching, scholarship and research seems to have converged. On the student side, the modes of self-formation seem to be much the same everywhere.

A proof of the portability of the European/American university form is its ready adoption in East Asia, where civilization is very deeply rooted and is different to the West in important respects. China, Singapore and South Korea have corporate university presidents, fecund researchers and self-investing students. Each element is somewhat modified when compared to the originating American university form. In China and Singapore the universities are more closely embedded in the State than is the case in the Atlantic countries. The faculty have a stronger sense of responsibility to both their students and the state. Students are more diligent in fashioning themselves through education (Marginson, 2016, Part II; Marginson, 2018a).

### **The Outer University: social roles**

So far I have talked about the Inner University. I have stopped short of nesting it in social purposes and roles, aside from making the point that it produces status, which is inherently social in that it is grounded in social relations. But when we model the University today, the Outer University, nested in society is equally important to consider.

Newman and Kant imagined the university/society relationship as entirely university driven. Newman believed that students immersed in knowledge were made fit for society. Kant believed that persons immersed in learned knowledge would, working together, both expand the space for public rationality and generate the continuous improvement of society. There is something important in this supply side vision. For example, the greater is the number of students immersed in science, the more scope there is for science in public conversation and policy. Yet neither the Newman Idea nor the Kant Idea capture what is socially distinctive about the University or explain why society continues to sustain it.

**The official narrative.** There is another narrative about the social role, that sustained by national governments. In this discourse government define the public good outcomes that universities should serve. Government funds and regulates universities to secure social and individual benefits, primarily in the form of individual opportunity and collective economic prosperity. This is a more prosaic, less universal and more nation-bound version of the Kantian narrative. But this governmental narrative is not convincing. After a career of working on higher education policy problems, I find that the agency of each of the three forces that I have described – the University as an institution, the self-forming student, the knowledge making faculty – is simply too strong and too autonomous to be driven, defined, limited or contained by either nation or nation-state. Certainly, the University is conditioned by government, especially through funding and regulation. It is by no means wholly determined by government.

Global research universities are partly disembedded from nation-states, operating with a high level of freedom outside the border, in their research and alliance making (Beerkens, 2004). Universities and faculty, not government regulation, shape the bulk of research activity. Governments fund, and interfere, but they are not the motive force. In their network analysis of science Caroline Wagner and colleagues concluded that ‘the growth of international collaboration’ is ‘decoupling from the goals of national science policy’ (Wagner, et al, 2015, p. 3). Though governments think they fund research to advance national policy goals, the quantitative network analysis by Wagner and colleagues finds that in two thirds of nations, the pattern of national science activity is now driven primarily by the global networks, rather than the global patterns being driven by national research system activity (Wagner, et al, 2015, p. 9). This again emphasises the bottom up, agential character of faculty research.

Nor do governments ultimately create, limit or otherwise control student self-formation. As noted, the standard policy narrative, which is embedded in everyone’s thinking, is that governments expand places in higher education so as to provide opportunity and meet the needs of the economy. Yet participation in higher education is growing rapidly across the world in all kinds of economies:



manufacturing economies, services economies, commodity economies, all but agricultural economies in fact. Higher education is growing in economies with high growth rates and economies with low growth rates. In the longer run, family and student demand spills out from under all government efforts to limit the number of places. As participation expands to include the whole middle class and moves further down the family income scale, it becomes more difficult for young people to stay outside higher education. The penalties of not having higher education are more severe, in terms of both work and social standing. This, more than rates of return, drives the growth of demand (Cantwell, et al, 2018; Trow, 1973).

Government gives ground, successively, to each increase in the popular demand for opportunity. Its lack of control over student self-formation is shown by the fact that the participation rate does not fall, or if so only briefly, it rises inexorably over time. Government finds itself opening up more and more places, or deregulating places altogether, though when it can it often shifts more of the cost onto families and students. Student self-formation in the University is socially driven, not policy driven.

**The New Everything?** If the official narrative is misleading, what *is* the unique social role of the University? What does it do, that no other organisation does, or does as well? Here the waters are muddy. As Clark Kerr said, multiversities do many things. As higher education expands universities take in more of society, spreads their activity maps and adopt more and more stakeholders.

At present the region and city building functions of universities are increasingly prominent: universities are evolving as adjuncts to local authorities as part of networked governance, and have long been a primary source of jobs. In the UK, universities monitor non-EU international students, as adjuncts of the Home Office. In many locations, university performing arts provide the main local cultural life. Universities reach downwards into schools, run hospitals and sometimes information systems for whole health sectors. The National University of Mexico, as well conducting a quarter of the nation's research, manages astronomical observatories, runs research ships up and down the Atlantic and the Pacific, provides symphony orchestras and houses the leading national football team.

Is the University the New Everything? Has it become the state and society itself? I don't think so. Universities should be fully engaged. The question is how much responsibility they bear and in which areas? We should distinguish core and non-core functions. Most activities I have listed could be done by organisations other than universities. Many do not require intensive academic knowledge. Non-university agents might be better at the arts, football, or migration policy. Some functions in health or governance are only in universities because of neoliberal devolution strategies in which governments transfer their responsibilities to autonomous public and private bodies. This is not a strong basis for the social role of universities. It also fails to explain why that social role is tenacious and universal.

## Two unique social roles

As I see it, the university has two primary external functions, or sets of functions. Its growth and survival rests on these functions. In both of these fields of activity social organisations other than the university also play a role, but the university has a special role – it is hegemonic within the total field of activity and shapes it elsewhere. These two functions are occupational credentialing and the production of codified knowledge.

**Credentialing.** Credentialing is the master system whereby the University distributes status on the social scale. It is true that occupational credentialing is shared between educational bodies, public regulators and professional bodies. In Law and Medicine professional bodies and internships can be part of the final stage. However, the overall pattern of the last half century, in an ever-growing number of occupations, has been to diminish on the job training and increase the role of into university classrooms, reading lists, essays and degree certificates. In some occupations there is continued debate, and transfers to university are sometimes (though rarely) reversed, but the primary movement is clear.

**Codification of knowledge.** Likewise, many kinds of organisations produce knowledge and related information in various forms, from think tanks to media to government. Many non-university organisations conduct research, including companies and public laboratories. However, in most countries universities lead published science and they have a near monopoly of the doctoral training of researchers for all sectors. Patterns vary by country but overall, the role of large research universities in research is growing in relative terms. For example, in China and Russia, some formerly separated academies and laboratories have been merged into the university sector. Overall the research outputs of public laboratories and institutes are growing more slowly than those of universities.

**Exchange between the two.** The two social roles are heterogenous but have become combined. The University's hegemony in codified knowledge determines the distinctive form taken by university teaching, which is Newman and von Humboldt's Idea of the immersion of student self-formation in knowledge. Students, like non-students, form themselves in many different parts of life, including the family, work and social media. Only in universities is knowledge an essential element of self-formation. Credentialing is prior soaked in knowledge rather than in workplace skills and this, in the diverse disciplines, shapes the agency that graduates bring into the workplace. The potency of the credentialing function provides a powerful protection for the knowledge-intensive learning regime.

The fact that student self-formation immediately prior to work occurs through immersion in knowledge at one remove from work, and not primarily through rehearsals for occupational practice, is a perpetual source of controversy. This means that the claims by business and industry that graduates are not prepared will always be with us. Under some circumstances – for example near universal participation in higher education, with low discrimination between different largely generic graduates, plus fast rising graduate unemployment – this tension could spell serious trouble for the University. It has not come to that. Until now both the credentialing regime and codified knowledge have proven to be sufficiently useful for both students and industry. Each constitutes successful self-reproducing systems.

## Inner/Outer status economy

One key to these processes of self-reproduction is that both the social role of the External University in knowledge and the social role of the External University in credentialing, are essential to status exchanges in the Inner University and vice versa.

Credentialing is the medium for the exchange of status between university and student. The research function of the University feeds into the value of its credentials. Immersion in knowledge is the prior condition of credentialing. In self-formation students make themselves into credential-able workers. And so on.

These inter-dependencies, within the Inner/Outer status economy which is the University, has more consequences than the production of social status alone. The codification of knowledge ranks the different kinds of knowledge according to academic take-up, university of origin, and discipline. Credentialing also sorts graduates on the basis of university and discipline. Both functions help to order institutions and shape student investment. Once again, we find status is like a glue that holds the modern University together. Branding, ranking, now dominate the landscape. We are all aware of status, at least in its institutional form. I said it was not pretty. It is certainly hierarchical. Coupled with the dominance of traditional universities, the status economy is caste-like, reproductive, in its sorting function.

Yet this Inner/Outer status economy also reproduces more attractive features of the University, such as knowledge production and student learning. If students did not gain this form of social value at the moment of graduation, their drive to educate themselves would be much reduced. This in turn would reduce the extent of other forms of self-formation in higher education, including their intellectual and cultural growth; and through the interdependency between the teaching and research functions of the University, it would reduce codified knowledge. The status economy enables us to maintain the Idea of Newman, and the Idea of Kant and von Humboldt, though primarily in the research-intensive sub-sector. The University is less good at spreading those Ideas to all.

## 2. The (contemporary) historical university

So this then is the University. A powerful combination of institutional agency, family and student agency, and faculty agency. Articulated by knowledge, as Newman and von Humboldt knew; articulated by credentials, as they later developed; and ever growing in size and function, as Kerr was the first to really understand. And in these processes driven and combined by the production and exchange of status, as I have argued here.

What are the implications for the real-life universities we inhabit? In the contemporary setting, the University is exceptionally dynamic in all three domains: the growth and worldwide spread of high student participation, the worldwide growth and spread of research activity and outputs, and the worldwide spread of the large multi-function university as the paradigmatic post-school institution. The fact that all three agencies exhibit this exceptional dynamism shows what a strong social form the University has become.

### Self-forming students

First, student-self formation, which is manifest in the growth of participation. From 1995 to 2015 the world Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in tertiary education, as measured by UNESCO, rose from 16 to 36 per cent, with four fifths of the world's 216 million students enrolled in full degree programmes (UNESCO, 2018). Of those about half can be expected to complete their degrees.

The GER increased by 20 per cent in the last 20 years. At that rate the GER reaches 50 per cent by 2040. In 60 national education systems, the GTER already exceeds half of the school leaver age cohort. The quality of mass higher education varies greatly, but it is clear that we are experiencing an extraordinary growth of educated 'capability', in Amartya Sen's (2000) term.

## Faculty agency

Second, faculty agency, the growth of knowledge. To access global science, nations need their own trained people, not just users but producers of research who interact with researchers abroad. All high-income and most middle-income countries now want their own science system and they are building doctoral education and employing researchers in unprecedented numbers. Alongside the expansion in student enrolment since the mid 1990s there has been equally rapid growth in investment in Research and Development and in the stock of published knowledge. Between 1990 and 2015 US research spending tripled in real terms. China grew its total investment in R&D from \$13 billion to \$409 billion (National Statistics Board, 2018).

In 2003-2016 the total world output of science papers, mostly by university researchers rose from 1.2 to 2.3 million, an increase of 93 per cent in only 13 years (NSB, 2018). The growth of science in East Asia has been especially remarkable. More than one third of all scientific papers published in English now include at least one author with a Chinese name (Xie and Freeman, 2018). China now leads the world in the production of high citation papers in mathematics and computing (Leiden University, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

These data have been listed in terms of nations, but the growth of cross-border collaboration, as identified in the number of internationally co-authored papers, has been more rapid than the growth of scientific output as a whole (NSB, 2018). As I noted previously, science is primarily bottom up and discipline based, and though it is primarily resourced nationally, its actual output is more global system driven than driven by bounded national systems.

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<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of these tendencies see Marginson, 2018b; Marginson, 2018c.

## Spread of the multiversity

Third, the spread of the large multi-discipline multi-purpose and often multi-site multiversity form of university. In the policy literature on diversity in higher education, it is often assumed that a major growth of enrolment and provision must trigger a greater variety of institutions by type. This has not happened. With some country exceptions, diversity by institution mission or type is static or declining, except in online and for-profit provision, which, however, remain secondary in all established higher education systems.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, there has been a reduction in the role of discipline-specialist institutions, and binary sector institutions, with both forms often merged into comprehensive multi-disciplinary universities in many countries. In some cases, such as Ireland, non-university institutions are being upgraded and redesignated as universities. In many though not all countries, a growing proportion of all higher education students are located in designated 'universities'; and it is likely a growing proportion are now located in universities with significant research. Meanwhile the average size of comprehensive multi-disciplinary universities is growing. In elite research universities, as in other institutions, size is one source of relative advantage.

## 3. Insecurities of the University

The march of the multiversity to fame and fortune. An institutional triumph on a scale unimaginable to Newman and Humboldt. Perhaps the extent of the global radiation of the University and science would have surprised Kerr, though he did anticipate the spreading process. But the continued hegemony of the University over the codification of knowledge, and occupational credentialing cannot be assumed. Indeed, the great growth of the university form, and its social functions, masks tensions and fragilities.

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive review of patterns of diversity and the rise of the multiversity form see Antonowicz, Cantwell, Froumin, Jones, Marginson and Pinheiro, 2018.

These are more exposed when the context, especially the political context, becomes significantly disturbed, as at present.<sup>4</sup> The many joins in this complex assemblage emerge as possible fault lines.

Let us look – briefly, because it is speculative – at the potentials and problems for the three kinds of agency (corporate institution, students, faculty) and the two unique social roles.

### The institution

I see several risks to the institution qua institution. The more the University becomes a container for the whole of society, and is pulled this way and that between a huge range of roles, the greater the risk that it will lose command of its own destiny amid short-termism and stakeholder accountability. A related problem, especially if autonomy declines, is role dissonance. We see this already. In some institutions there is tension between on one hand local and national enmeshment, and on the other hand global research, global mobility and the cosmopolitan ideal. The external populist attack on science can be seen off, although it is destabilising, but doubts about local commitment is a slow drip problem harder to evade.

**Debundling.** More fundamentally, there are inefficiencies, diseconomies of scope, in the combinatory model of the multiversity. None of the functions of this conglomerate corporate institution are done especially well because they are part-contaminated by other functions and finances are never wholly separate. This leads to the core issue, the danger that confronts the University of Newman, Kant and Kerr. Commercial companies want the University to be debundled between its teaching, research, credentialing and service functions. This would kick-start huge new opportunities in different industry sectors, at the price of destroying the University and much of what it does.

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<sup>4</sup> For more discussion see Marginson 2018c.



Once the university form becomes hegemonic in higher education it is hard to displace. Once established, the forces of aggregation and combination seem to be stronger than the forces for debundling and the logic of specialisation/niches. The status economy that is the University secures critical mass and a growing number of people invest in it. Debundling would undo the status economy, which has many beneficiaries in society.

We see debundled higher education only in those zones in which the University as such has not been strongly established, or remains a small elite sector, in parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In those zones rampant marketisation, for example small private colleges in India and for-profit and online delivery in Africa, is now blocking the evolution of high participation systems of higher education of adequate quality.

The danger is that governments under commercial pressure might pursue debundling as a kind of crusade with anti-trust style legislation. It would be difficult to do in the federated United States but much easier to do so in UK or Ireland, with their centralised polities.

## Faculty agency

I see two risks to faculty agency. The sharp end problem, found in a small group of countries, is suppression. At present the countries severely at risk include Turkey, Hungary and parts of the Middle East and Africa. Currently we hope the state politicisation of the University, as in the Cultural Revolution period, does not return to China. We hope that China stays off the list of countries in which faculty agency is severely repressed. Presently faculty retain scope to determine their research, especially in the sciences, though there is government interference in research decisions (as in many countries), and social scientists, hemmed by official readings of 'the social', are more constrained than are natural scientists.

The larger and more universal danger for faculty is a slow drip problem – the fragmentation of collective agency. Agency is often exceptionally strong in the leading universities but more imperilled lower down. Fragmentation takes a number

of forms, including the relative growth of casual (hourly rate or 'part-time') labour, erosion in the number of tenured posts in research intensive universities, the covering of the capacity for educational and research-based faculty judgments in lower tier institutions in which business norms predominate.

### Student self-formation

There are two risks to student self-formation. One is a problem that is eating into contemporary representative democracy (Runciman, 2018). The social media world of instant emotions, in which we connect instantly to thousands of others, is much more exciting than the long hard slog. In democracy, the social media conversation is displacing the slow discussion-based process of winning support in political parties and institutions. In universities the social media world and the kind of agency it fosters can overshadow self-development in knowledge and labour markets with their uncertain timelines and unpredictable rewards, and the difficulty of the process. Learning can be hard. It is impossible to see self-forming student agency evaporating in East Asia but perhaps it could happen in the United States.

The second danger that in more unequal societies, as universal participation approaches, the rewards to each new layer of graduates will be no longer enough to sustain the economic drivers of the self-formation process, especially if the private costs of higher education increase. The difference between being a graduate and being a non-graduate will shrink at the margin to zero. In essence, this is the danger that the growth of human capability will outstrip the expansion of opportunities to use that capability (Cantwell, et al, 2018, Chapter 16).

This is not an immediate danger except perhaps in the United States. In the US tertiary participation is near universal but completion is weak, private costs are rising and social inequality is rampant, so that the bottom layer of graduates has poor prospects. Elsewhere there is further to go before the University ceases to be the hope of aspiring families.

## The thin thread

In the last analysis the future of the University rests on the continued healthy evolution of the two social connectors, which are knowledge and credentials. The two are related. If credentials were separated from the learning programme and became based on measured occupational skills, self-formation would no longer be immersed in knowledge. Likewise, those same credentials would no longer be underpinned by the University qua university and the bottom would be knocked out of the status economy in higher education.

But I think the greatest danger we face is not debundling, which would only occur under certain political conditions and would be strongly contested. Debundling threatens the social value of past degrees as well as present degrees. No, the larger problem, which is less visible and where there is not external constituency to mobilise in support, is the slow drip problem of the fragmentation of faculty agency in a casualised academic labour market.

Here universities themselves must be persuaded that it is not in their interests to build institutional agency deconstructing faculty agency. A relatively stable core faculty with critical mass is not a managerial weakness but an education and research strength. For research-based faculty sustain the immersion of learning in knowledge, ensuring that the research mission is not a separate economy decoupled from the rest, but feeds into the other parts of this unified status economy, and the benefits that it fosters.

In this manner we maintain unbroken the thin thread that we have inherited from Newman and Kant. That thread will break someday. Nothing lasts for ever. We can hope that it will not break soon. For at this time we have nothing better with which to replace it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For further supporting arguments, data and references, see the book *High Participation Systems of Higher Education* (Cantwell, et al, 2018).

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# RESPONSE

Aidan Mulkeen

## AN IRISH VIEW

### Introduction

I would like to thank Professor Marginson for a very interesting and thought-provoking lecture. He has deftly weaved together the purposes of a university, and the threats to its future. It is a very rich and nuanced paper, and is worth rereading multiple times. The paper is rooted in a breadth of experience and scholarship, which makes it all the more important that we consider it carefully, and reflect on its messages.

### 1. Rapid Expansion

I will start with an Irish perspective. The story of rapid expansion of participation is one that is very familiar here. It is worth reminding ourselves of the enormous transformation of Irish higher education.

100 years ago there were about 2,500 students in universities (2,254 in 1910). We now have 235,000 students in higher education – a hundredfold increase in as many years. By 1958 there were 8,300 students in higher education. This was just before the big economic expansion of the 1960s. We now have 8,500 PhD students (alone) in our higher education system.

These figures are just examples, but they are illustrative of the fundamental shift in participation in education, and in education attainment.

This has enormous implications for us as a people which I will illustrate by a personal anecdote. Sometime in the mid 1990s, I was on a flight on Bangladesh Biman airlines, and to relieve boredom, I read the in-flight magazine. It included full page government ads trying to encourage investment in Bangladesh, and there were two big selling points:

- a) We have the lowest labour rates in the world, AND
- b) We will use the army to prevent any difficulties with organised labour.

When I flew into Dublin airport, there was a lovely picture of some Irish young people on their conferring day, with the slogan 'The young Irish: hire them before they hire you'.

In my view, the juxtaposition of these two scenarios clearly illustrates the global skills market, not at the level of the individual, but at the level of nation-states. At national level, countries with high levels of education can attract high level jobs. Those with lower levels of education compete for lower level jobs. The ads from the Bangladeshi government were not acts of callous cruelty. They were acts of desperation. That government was desperate to attract any jobs and any economic activity, and aware that they had nothing to offer but unskilled labour and low-cost labour.

By contrast, Ireland in the last century has been transformed from a largely agrarian economy, where most people were either subsistence farmers or sold their physical labour, to an information economy, where most people are employed in skilled jobs using their intellectual skills. This transformation could not have happened without mass higher education. As a result of this economic transformation, we are able to support lifestyles that our grandparents could not imagine.

Ireland's prosperity is of course not solely a product of its educational transformation. There are cause and effect loops here, as economic success enabled wider education provision which in turn enabled further economic development. But education has been a key enabler of economic development throughout.

### **The returns to education have been increasing**

Some economists have analysed the impact of education at country level, and there are some very interesting findings. Harry Patrinos and George Psacharopoulos (2011), for example, report that country level returns to education have been increasing steadily since the 1950s. In other words, the wealth gap between



countries associated with different levels of education attainment has been growing. That should not surprise us, since with increasing globalisation, the global skill market is increasingly segmented. It is however a key point: higher levels of educational attainment are more important as determinants of national prosperity now than they were even a generation ago.

And it is more than just the economy: Patrinos and Psacharopoulos also found that national educational attainment is associated with greater equality of income distribution. Economists use a Gini coefficient as an indicator of the inequality of wealth distribution. Countries with higher levels of education have a more equitable wealth distribution. Similarly, there is a correlation between levels of educational attainment and democratic governance, better health indicators, more social inclusion, and more tolerant societies.

In all cases there are notable outliers, and there are cause and effect loops. Therefore I am not claiming that education is the magic solution for all problems, but I am arguing that high levels of education are inextricably linked with multiple aspects of societal wellbeing, and that the impact goes far beyond the economic.

Again, we can see examples of this in the Irish experience. Widening social access to university has been a major mechanism for increasing social mobility, which is a public policy justification for public expenditure. I would also like to suggest that over the last 60 years, as Ireland scaled up participation rates in higher education, Ireland has become a more liberal, tolerant society.

### **The power of individual demand**

Professor Marginson is right to say that the growth of university education is driven not by policy but by individual demand. If policymakers were in complete control, we in Ireland might have stopped at the immediate and predictable needs of the economy. But public demand outstrips that, and has repeatedly driven growth faster than projections anticipated.

Paradoxically access to higher education is both a mechanism for social mobility and also the mechanism by which the better off in society capture access to the best careers. Its power as a mechanism for career capture is one of the reasons why strong private demand sustains.

## 2. Risks

In Ireland, I believe that we have a system which has served us very well, and of which we should be proud. Professor Marginson has however identified some risks, and I will now consider three of those risks.

### **Risk A: Student demand**

One of identified risks is that demand for university places might fall off. This is the 'over-education scenario' where demand for higher education falls off when participation in higher education vastly outpaces the demand in the labour market. In my view this would not reduce demand. Mass access will not decrease demand – it will only increase the penalty for non-participation. If 90% of the population has a degree, the 10% who do not will be increasingly disadvantaged. We have already seen this with expansion of participation at Leaving Certificate level (terminal assessments in Irish second-level education system) – those who do not progress to Leaving Certificate are much more likely to be unemployed than before.

A decline may occur if employers began to lose confidence in university education. In Ireland, employers have however consistently retained their faith in graduates. They pay a premium to recruit graduates, and they tend to promote graduates more quickly. They recognise an added-value derived from university education. As long as that is the case, it is hard to foresee a drop in individual demand.

In any case the decision to go to university is not necessarily a rational decision. When it comes to the children in their care, parents and guardians do not make cost-benefit calculations. Instead they tend to do anything they can to give their children the best chance in life, even if the odds are not good.

It seems to be the case that even in countries where there is high graduate unemployment, parents are willing to spend money to send their children to university. I am thinking of Uganda for example, where there is high graduate unemployment, and a university degree (except in some disciplines) does not attract a premium from private sector employers. Yet families spend money they can ill afford to send their children to university.

Finally, concern about falling demand assumes that demand is driven by the labour market. I contend that it is not. If we imagine a future world where robots do all the work, and we even have robots to fix the robots and design new ones. Arguably there would be little or no need for any of us to have a job.

Would we still want to learn about the world; would we still read, discuss, explore new ideas? I think the answer is yes, and for that reason demand for universities would be sustained, even if the labour market incentive was removed.

For all of the stated reasons, I am not concerned about risk of drop in individual demand for higher education.

### **Risk B: Loss of faith in universities**

Professor Marginson has suggested that a key part of what universities do is credentialing, or conferring of status. In my view, status is only of value because people believe it to be of value. This does not mean that it is a confidence trick – the same is true of many other things, including money.

There is an embedded risk here for universities. Public understanding of what a university does is surprisingly poor. Or to put it another way, we in the higher education business have not done a good job of communicating what we do. If you ask the public about a university education, the responses you get include descriptions in the same terms as schooling (transfer of a body of knowledge) and sometimes, descriptions in terms of credentials.

Universities, however, tend to see their role in the development of the self-forming students, developing intellectual skills through deep engagement with their academic discipline(s).

This mismatch of understanding of purpose is a risk for the following reasons:

- ▶ Public institutions rely largely on public funding, political decisions, and ultimately public opinion and support;
- ▶ The university or college lecture is often seen as the unit of output, leading to concern about inefficiencies;
- ▶ As a result, universities can be vulnerable to resource reductions which may eventually undermine quality, and therefore impact negatively on value.

The misunderstanding of the function of higher education has also encouraged predictions of the technological displacement of universities. Over recent decades, the advent of video, computer-based training, interactive learning, web-based training, and MOOCs have given rise to predictions of ‘university redundancy’. In my view, these predictions miss the social context of learning, the importance of exposure to different ideas, the impact of working and learning within a peer group, and the difference between human interaction and mediated interaction. Technological solutions certainly do work for some niche groups of learners but based on my personal experience, they do not pose an immediate threat to university education. By contrast, I believe that if we not manage to develop a shared understanding of our purpose and communicate this more effectively, we may run the risk of policy-related threats.

### **Risk C: Loss of autonomy**

The third risk I will address is the risk of loss of autonomy, focusing particularly on the increased use of performance-related indicators. As higher education systems expand, we rely more on indicators as system management tools. We do this at all levels, both within institutions and at national policy level.

I am a fan of data-driven argument. In principle, an indicator is a measure which is monitored over time and as such it is a valuable source of information and should be a good thing. But when indicators become part of a high stakes decision-making, there is a risk of perverse consequences. If for example, national HE legislation or policy includes performance-based funding, the indicators used to assess that performance become high stakes. And high stakes indicators have two impacts:

- ▶ They create an incentive to manipulate the indicator (at least at the margin)
- ▶ They become the dominant agenda, displacing other priorities.

I will illustrate with the example of student progression rates as an indicator. Measuring student progression rates from first year to second year at undergraduate degree level is useful. If we see a very low progression rate in a programme, we can ask questions. If we see a 100% progression rate we also might also start to ask questions. All of this is positive, but if university funding is linked to the progression rate, then behaviours are likely to change. Questions may not be asked about the programme with 100% progression rate and there may be pressure on the programme with the low progression rate to pass more students. Thus, the indicator can influence practice negatively. There can be more invidious consequences. In my hypothetical case, the institution might deprioritise widening participation, if there is evidence that students from non-traditional backgrounds normally have lower progression rates.

In Ireland, we do not yet have high stakes indicators, but we have hints of them. At present funding is largely allocated by formula, and indicators are used to inform an annual dialogue in which issues can be discussed. There are nonetheless signals that government's intention is to implement a performance-based funding model, withholding funding from those who do not meet specified targets, and providing bonus funding for those who do. If such a model materialises, it is likely that indicators will strengthen into targets, and this will encourage unknown perverse effects. The people who decide which indicators are on the list will be indirectly steering the direction of the system, perhaps without realising the implications of their actions.

### 3. Rankings

While control via government-sanctioned indicators is undesirable, a worse alternative exists in the form of university rankings. A striking development in recent years has been the growing status and impact of international university rankings. These use a series of indicators to create a ranked list of institutions, and these ranked lists have impacts on student recruitment, particularly international students, on staff recruitment and in facilitating linkages with similarly ranked partner institutions. Rankings are very influential.

Consider how they are derived. A company, sometimes a for-profit company, develops a set of indicators, and decides their weightings. These indicators are of course be influenced by the availability of data, but the relative weighting of the indicators reflect the designers' perception of what is important. These rankings then become influential determinants of the prosperity of universities, and consequently shape the behaviours of universities who try to optimise their ranking. It is my view that those who do not play the game get lower rankings and become less prosperous and I ask the question: have such rankings created a bizarre situation, where universities – traditionally the champions of free and critical thought – are ranked and classified by commercial organisations using a set of numerical indicators. In the process, the ranking organisation has a disproportionate influence on the behaviour of universities.

This does seem to put power in the wrong hands, and in a way that is particularly inappropriate for universities.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I have a lot of confidence in the university as an institution, however, I think it is widely misunderstood. I believe that the value of a university lies in developing an individual's intellectual skills through deep engagement with one or more disciplines. This develops an autonomous learner, who is able to absorb and critique new ideas, to develop informed opinions, and to communicate ideas clearly. These are what I think gives the graduate benefit in the long term. As long as the university does this well, I cannot see demand for this education diminishing.

This is an important caveat, because I identify two very real threats.

- a) If academic quality falls and the education provided is not of value, then it may undermine the system. This would be a slow change – people would still want the status long after the real benefit had gone.
- b) If academic quality varies across institutions, then the value of the credentials is eroded. The status of credentials is then likely to become more institution-specific. And I believe that is socially regressive because of a self-reinforcing cycle.

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