

Nick Butler

Speech at the Foundation for Science and Technology on 25th October, 2006 on the theme of “What are universities for?”.

Speak as non academic, from business perspective – but as someone who greatly admires academia at its best and who has seen through business some of the great advances that have been made.

Advised that academics will all be pessimistic. Cheerful academic an oxymoron.

I think there are a number of answers to the question what universities are for.

Universities have filled different roles historically.

- Reflection of the culture of the time and place – sometimes a reflection of the counter culture.
- In the UK transformed by the drive to professionalism in the 19th century and more recently by expansion of access beyond the elite.
- Sometimes a reflection of privilege; sometimes a challenge to privilege.
- Universities play a different role in different cultures – such as Iran or China – though in China in particular their function is changing as a result of dramatic expansion.
- In Russia and Azerbaijan under communism they were a focal point of resistance and dissent. President of Azerbaijan was elected because he had been President of the Academy. But unfortunately he only lasted six months.

The focus of this discussion is on the UK – now.

In our context universities serve four purposes.

First, they exist to advance knowledge through pure research - in all fields, not just science.

That knowledge is fact based and universities bring the commitment to fact as the fundamental source of policy. That is very important. Hard to think of a faith based university – that must be a contradiction in terms.

Science is main focus tonight and my view is that the importance of knowledge means that research funding should be concentrated. The resources needed are considerable – therefore value in doing some work at a European scale.

I believe there is value in choosing areas of focus.

I also believe there is value in a sensible research assessment exercise which rewards the best but which also enables new and thriving departments to move up the league table. I see very little value in a process which encourages gaming.

I believe there would be great value in encouraging multidisciplinary work because the interplay across the sciences and even with non sciences such as economics can be very interesting and important. Climate change is a prime example of an issue on which such multidisciplinary work is needed.

Above all we should recognize that this is now an international sector. Assets are mobile. Academics, best students, industrial research funds can all move geographically. That is a good thing but it means that pay and the availability of funds matter. Universities not immune to market forces.

A second element of the purpose of universities is their support for the linkage of research to application, which is usually a function of business.

That is a good thing not a bad thing though business should not control or limit the dissemination of knowledge.

Much progress has been made in this area, but the link can still be a matter of sensitivity. There are still some real cultural divisions. When BP invested in a centre for fluid flow analysis in Cambridge it was described as a "triumph of ignorance and greed" even though there was no attempt to control intellectual property.

The links between universities and business need to be open and transparent and should work at different levels. Local business across different regions can benefit just as much as big business working internationally.

European universities tend to be written down but they are probably more integrated into local communities and regions and in some cases business than many of our universities in the UK.

Thirdly universities exist as instruments of social mobility and meritocracy - in the best sense of that word.

Universities are not just about research. Also about teaching of both skills and the ability to learn. They are concerned with the development of individuals and of opportunity.

I would be the deputy assistant librarian in Blackpool public library if I hadn't managed to get to Cambridge.

In that role universities don't exist in isolation - they are part of the wider education system and the biggest intervention in support of meritocracy should come at the secondary level - which is why if universities are to be properly funded students have to pay something for the benefit of a higher education.

That's also why universities need to be diverse. There is an illusion that all degrees the same and that all universities can be measured on a single league table. That is a trend where universities have followed business schools.

I believe it is a false process of measurement and damaging to the morale and achievements of many universities which are not world leading centres of research but which do a tremendous job with a different focus.

Diversity should come in many ways. There should be 1, 2, 3, and 4 year courses. There should education through life and the capacity to return to college. Teaching should cover many different skills. There is room for the practical as well as the academic. Let a 1,000 universities bloom.

This diversity is very important for social mobility. I believe in merit but there isn't just one form of merit.

Fourthly and this may be too idealistic I believe that universities have a role beyond the boundaries of a nation state. Knowledge knows (or should know) no boundaries. Many of our problems (environment, security) are international in scope. The academy should be international in its search for knowledge and the application of that knowledge.

I am about to go to Cambridge to non academic role on energy - conscious from the start that the boundaries of that work are not the boundaries of the UK, or any one faculty, or any single element of society.

Conclusion.

In summary I believe that universities emerging from their shell.

The leadership stronger and more willing to speak out. Organisation and governance is stronger.

Universities are slowly pushing back against over regulation and against unnecessary interference by Government. They are not being "privatized" but they are should "independent".

So overall I am optimistic.

I believe universities are a very important force in society and that we are fortunate in this country to have a very strong base from which to build.