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Is it Time to Rethink the ‘University’?

Professor Dennis Hayes



The 21st century has seen a plethora of Jeremiads on the theme ‘what are universities for?’ Whatever their specific focus, they reflect a contemporary crisis of meaning within the academy and in wider society about the nature and purpose of the university. The ‘neo-liberal marketization’ of higher education has been said to ‘commodify’ and turn into a business an education that was previously valued for its own sake. We are said to be in a period of ‘post-academia’ and are witnessing the end of the liberal arts university. Others argue that, historically, there is little evidence of any ‘golden age’ of liberal academia and often the best education was vocationally-oriented. Opponents and apologists for University PLC can claim some history to support their arguments but fail to place them within broader historical discussions of what the university is. Fads and fashions cloud academic

writing on the university and reading history backwards is the norm. Looking back at major attempts to redefine the university reveals how the idea of the liberal university came into being and how it was, for a short time, a reality. Today’s socio-cultural crisis of meaning about education allowed the term ‘university’ to be used in a Humpty Dumpty way by vice-chancellors, academics and commentators, meaning what they want it to mean.

On my bookshelves is a swathe of indignant tomes about the state of the contemporary university with titles like *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities*; *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education*; *The University in Ruins*; *Degrees of Nonsense: The Demise of the University in Ireland*; *Consuming Higher Education: Why Leaning Can’t be Bought*; *American Higher Education in Crisis*?



Dennis Hayes is Professor of Education at the University of Derby where he is chair of the College of Education Research Committee and the programme leader for PhDs in education. He is a founder of the campaign group Academics For Academic Freedom (AFAF) which is now a membership organisation with a members' blog. He is the co-author of *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (2008), which predicated the coming of the ‘therapeutic university’.

What Everyone Needs to Know; From University to Uni; The Changing University?; What Are Universities For?; Academic Freedom in an age of Conformity; Confronting the fear of knowledge and even one of my own, *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*, and most recently *What's Happened to the University? A sociological exploration of its infantilisation*. The classic jeremiad about the university is, of course, Allan Bloom's international best-seller from 1989, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*.

There is also a literature of 'salvation' books with titles like *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea; The New Idea of a University; For a Radical Higher Education* and so on – even my new book *Beyond McDonaldization: visions of higher education* is, in part, a 'salvation' text.

THE CRISIS OF MEANING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Some academics have made a career out of studying higher education, most notable among them being Ron Barnett, who, over his academic career, has produced over a dozen books and numerous articles on the idea of a university. Always interesting, they have run with every theoretical fad and fashion from post-modernist uncertainty and supercomplexity theory to a metaphysical consideration of eight 'possible' universities in *Becoming a University*. These are the metaphysical university, the scientific university, the entrepreneurial university, the bureaucratic university, the liquid university, the therapeutic university, the authentic university and the ecological university.

These books and articles are indicative of an intellectual crisis – we have lost the idea of a university. Because of this crisis universities have slowly adopted new purposes beyond the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The focus on the so-called 'student experience' and a desire, and in the UK a requirement, to show that university research has social and economic 'impact' are two of the most dangerous and destructive expressions of the new idea of a 'university'. In this context the vocationalisation of the 'university' will continue and higher 'education' will continue to be nothing more than higher 'training'.

'SNOWFLAKES' AND THE DIMINISHED IDEA OF HUMAN BEING

In 2008 I co-authored a book entitled *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* which discussed a unique 'therapeutic turn' in education. In essence this made teachers and other professionals see every child and young person as vulnerable, as a potential victim. The new form of professional relationship that resulted can be described as 'T2V' or giving 'Therapy to Victims'. Initially, the therapeutic turn in education was a spontaneous expression of the therapeutic culture in which we live. It began with a concern with children and young people's low self-esteem, then with bullying, stress and teenage unhappiness. What was happening was the pathologising of normal childhood and adolescent behaviour, emotions and moods. A continuing stream of educational initiatives then followed including formal lessons on the 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)' pedagogic initiatives like 'circle time' and 'happiness' and 'mindfulness' classes. Ofsted and the New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments became obsessed with child safety. Pupils were taught they must never be upset and that education was all about them and their emotional lives. This generation has now matriculated and they worry they might be emotionally upset and unable to cope with ideas that challenge their comfortable and comforting beliefs. They have been labelled the 'Snowflake Generation' but it is not the students' fault. Over the past decade we have seen the institutional construction in all educational sectors of young people as diminished human beings who are essentially vulnerable.

The Snowflake Generation's worries are misplaced as they are coming to what I have labelled the 'therapeutic university' where unthreatening 'Welcome Weeks' are replacing 'Freshers' Weeks' and an army of counsellors are ready to help students in the terrible transition from home to the big school that university was becoming; where anti-stress activities and counselling abound and where there are 'puppy rooms' where stressed students can rest and recover from exam stress by petting therapy dogs. All this is easy to lampoon but the infantilisation of students has spread to the curriculum.

Demands for 'trigger warnings' on courses and course material that might upset someone have

dramatically and suddenly increased. I first became aware of them three years ago through reading an article by the US-based journalist Jenny Jarvie in the *New Republic* (Jarvie, 2014). Student Unions have taken them up and even the University of Oxford has them on its law courses. The call for ‘safe spaces’ for debate have gone from being a rare demand for some minority groups to one for all students. The online magazine *spiked* has focused on their increase in their analyses for the Free Speech University Rankings (FSUR).

The continuing call for ‘trigger warnings’ is absurd when it has been shown they actually harm any truly vulnerable student by taking away the possibility of facing up to issues. But snowflakes are unmoved by facts. Similarly, the idea that you need safe spaces encourages feelings of vulnerability in a tyrannical way. Is it now unquestionable that students will be hurt by ideas and must be protected from anything that offends their feelings? It can only stunt intellectual growth which requires the clash of ideas and coming to terms with arguments that students may find offensive.

Generation Snowflake grew up in a society and a culture dominated by concerns about self-esteem, self-reliance, bullying, psychological hurt and mental health well (see Fox, 2016). When this generation arrived at university they were unprepared for intellectual challenges and unwilling to accept any debate and any ideas that made them feel in anyway uncomfortable. This might not be of any concern if the academy was not defined by the pursuit of knowledge without fear or favour. Universities cannot engage in this pursuit if they are concerned with not being offensive and not hurting anyone’s feelings.

What is curious is that writers on academic freedom ignore or perhaps play down the impact of the therapeutic culture which dominates wider society and the university.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Vanessa Pupavac has documented – in a detailed historical and global survey – the loss of the Enlightenment vision of humanity’s potential and its replacement by a diminished idea of human being. This has led to a decline in the support intellectuals and politicians give to free speech. This decline is paralleled by a decline in academic freedom.

The Enlightenment view of a common humanity seeking rational understanding through communication has been replaced by ‘linguistic governance’. Linguistic governance expresses a view of humanity as constituted by vulnerable citizens who must be protected: ‘the concept of vulnerability involves anticipatory victimhood and the imperative to take preventative action’ (Pupavac, 2012: 227). The result is restrictive legislation, speech codes, ‘no platform policies’ and censorship.

CAN WE SAVE A SECOND ORDER VALUE?

In his chapter in *Why Academic Freedom Matters* and in his book *What’s Happened to the University?* Frank Furedi argues that ‘Academic Freedom’ is now, and at best, a ‘second order value’. It is traded off against a range of other values often embodied in university mission statements such as ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’, ‘sustainability’, ‘impact’ and ‘employability’. Furedi sees the defence of academic freedom, as the defining value of the university, as the first step in a fight to restore academia.

But we need uncompromising warriors in this fight because academic freedom is always qualified by its seeming defenders. In December 2016 staff and students from the University of Aberdeen produced a manifesto *Reclaiming Our University*. The section on academic freedom begins with a statement similar to my understanding of what academic freedom means:

“(s9) Academic freedom is exemplary. In everything they do, academics in our university seek to live to the fullest extent a freedom that, in a democratic society, is available to every citizen. Thus academic freedom is not distinct from the freedom of the citizen; it is an intensification of that freedom.”

Excellent, then in the next section we read:

“(s10) We have to trust that members of our academic community, whatever their rank or status, will exercise their freedom wisely.”

This qualification is a ‘but’ that can be widely and not wisely interpreted. There is a strange linguistic function in such ‘buts’. When people say “I believe in free speech and academic freedom but it must be used inoffensively or wisely” then the ‘but’ negates the previous part of the proposition and it now reads “I do NOT believe in free speech and academic freedom”. Both are absolutes and we must uphold them with no ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’.

BACK TO THE FUTURE OR BEGIN AGAIN?

Whether salvation of the existing university is possible depends on overcoming the crisis of meaning which requires, first and foremost, understanding that we are facing a wider political and socio-cultural attack on ourselves as autonomous knowing subjects. Without understanding this there can be no successful arguments to ensure the future of the university.

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