

## **Beyond the student experience: rethinking higher education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

Keynote Speech for the Annual Higher Education Academy Conference  
*Transforming the Student Experience*  
Harrogate, Tuesday 1 July -Thursday 3 July 2008

Professor Rob Cuthbert, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of the West of England

### **Introduction**

You will already have noticed that I am not Baroness Morgan of Drefelin. There is no danger that I will ever be mistaken for a Government Minister, and you have therefore been spared the list of things this Government has done for higher education in general, and teaching in particular. It's quite an impressive list, but I'm not going to repeat it. That's the good news.

The bad news is that I'm a heretic. I want to talk about how we are getting some important things wrong. Those things include the mission of the Academy, the theme of this conference, and the way we think about higher education. To prove my credentials as a heretic, I have no Powerpoint presentation.

I want to talk about things that matter to all of us:

- Rewards and recognition for teaching
- The links between teaching and research
- The idea of the university
- Academic freedom, and
- The nature and purposes of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Along the way I want to talk about management, leadership and governance, institutional strategy, mission and diversity, and policy and policymaking. And I want to talk about the Academy. To be precise, I want to talk about how we think about those things, because that can distort not only what we pay attention to, but how we understand the problems we face. And that leads us to define some problems in ways which make them insoluble. The insoluble problems include the problem of lack of recognition and reward for teaching.

So, I want to talk about our **ideas** about higher education.

Ideas can change not just higher education but the whole world. When Keynes wrote *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* in 1935 he helped the world to escape economic stagnation by changing how people thought about money and credit. And in *The General Theory* Keynes said: "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds."

We, brought up as we have been, have some old ideas about higher education, in every corner of our minds. We need to escape them.

I'm going to start with some history, especially the history of English higher education over the last 50 years. That will explain how we got into bad habits in thinking about higher education. Later I will suggest how we should think differently. 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education is much too diverse, and much too distributed, to be trapped in one old paradigm.

### **History**

So let's begin by turning the clock back, to see where our ideas came from. 200 years ago a Prussian civil servant called Alexander von Humboldt wrote a memorandum which created a powerful idea of the university. He wanted universities to flourish so they could help the

Prussian state recover from the humiliation of defeat in the Napoleonic Wars, and he argued that academic freedom was a necessary condition for universities to do that. It was a kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian Leitch Report.

Von Humboldt's ideas helped to form our modern idea of the university. But when he wrote his memorandum he had no worries about reward and recognition for teaching. He was just trying to ensure that teaching was free enough to explore ideas in a way which made for true higher education.

Von Humboldt also argued that a university should be a place where teaching, research and scholarship come together in what has become known as the research-teaching-scholarship nexus. The success of his ideas led to a growth of research, and by the late 19th century the presidents of Harvard and Yale were making speeches criticising the advent of research and the way it had begun to divert universities away from their core mission of teaching.

Those criticisms may seem improbable to anyone who grew up in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when research has achieved unprecedented dominance in our thinking about higher education. Higher education, like football, is a global industry with mobile professionals. But teaching stars, even Distinguished National Teaching Fellows, are not the subject of big transfer deals. In higher education the 'star wars' are fought over research, not over teaching.

There were **two** ideas – academic freedom, and the research-teaching-scholarship nexus – at the heart of von Humboldt's idea of higher education. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we lost sight of academic freedom and turned to the dark side of Humboldt's ideas, which is the research-teaching-scholarship nexus.

To show you what I mean I'm going to do a brief history of ideas about English higher education over the last 50 years – English, because English ideas tend to dominate the way we think. And none more so than the Robbins Report.

#### *Robbins, Trow and the Research-Teaching-Scholarship Nexus*

The Robbins Report in 1963 exerted a huge influence on how we think about higher education. It set out the purposes of higher education in such memorable terms that we still take it as the classic articulation of what higher education is for: "the development of the general powers of the mind", and so on.

Despite its intentions, the Report was essentially backward-looking. Its idea of the university was the idea that already existed. Its expression of the idea was lyrical and inspirational, but its mostly mistaken proposals for the future were rooted in that idea, and were blind to the possibilities inherent in the local authority colleges which later became the polytechnics.

Robbins' glorious statement of the purposes of higher education was transposed into an **idea of the university** which became irresistibly powerful, for academics and for policymakers. We fixed the idea of the university to correspond to an age when universities catered for less than 10% of the population. It appealed to us because it described the kind of university many of us experienced as an undergraduate. And it described the kind of university which worldwide enjoys the highest academic prestige.

The idea of the university grew from the research-teaching-scholarship nexus, mediated by Newman, Sidney and Beatrice Webb at the LSE at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robbins and others, and modified by mid-to-late 20th century liberal democracy. The principal exponent of the nexus in the 1960s and 1970s was Martin Trow, a wonderful liberal thinker and passionate advocate for universal higher education. Trow described the research-teaching-scholarship nexus as the defining characteristic of the university. And we **so** wanted to believe in Trow's ideas, the model of higher education development from elite through mass to universal provision, that we swallowed whole the idea of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus. It has shaped our thinking about higher education policy for the last 50 years.

### *The binary policy and the rise of the polytechnics*

But in the mid-1960s a civil servant called Toby Weaver and Secretary of State Tony Crosland had a different idea. They created the binary policy, with the higher education system divided between the universities and the polytechnics.

The polytechnics embodied a vocational applied tradition of higher education. They did little or no research and were not funded for it. The policy rhetoric was 'different but equal', but the lived experience was different. John Pratt and Tyrell Burgess persuasively theorised the development of polytechnics as a matter of **academic drift**, in which the institutions developed according to the twin pressures of the external funding regime and the internal staff desire for greater academic status and higher-level work. Influenced by the dominant idea of a **proper** university, the new polytechnics agitated for 'parity of esteem'.

They were nowhere near such parity, but they were hugely successful, partly because they were able to expand freely in response to student demand. Consequently, by the mid-1980s, controlling the cost of local authority higher education was becoming a major policy issue. But expanding the polytechnics was cheap because the level of funding per student, the so-called **unit of resource**, was much lower.

There was a national mechanism for pooling the costs of non-university higher education between all local authorities, which was overseen by the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education, or NAB. NAB embarrassed the University Grants Committee by using the idea of the unit of resource. In the end the UGC was forced to disaggregate the money it spent, and declared, to no-one's surprise, that the cost of teaching a student in universities was marginally lower than in polytechnics, with the rest of the university unit of resource being spent on research. That was how the original amount of QR was fixed. It took parity of funding off the political agenda for a while, but it led directly to the RAE and the separation of T and R funding streams a few years later. The idea of the **unit of resource** had changed how we think about the system in the most fundamental way.

The local authorities could not control the funding and academic growth of the polytechnics, so they compensated with excessively bureaucratic controls over non-academic staff and processes, which generated a backlash from the polytechnic directors about mismanagement. And so the idea of **management** came to dominate the higher education policy agenda from the mid-1980s.

### *The rise of management*

The politics of all this were so absorbing that no-one paid enough attention to the lower-frequency policy waves created by the separation of the T and R streams of funding. It was taken for granted that this was the natural order of things when the binary policy ended. The polytechnics became independent, gained university title, and there was a unified Higher Education Funding Council for England. The RAE was increasingly controversial, but no-one asked why a different kind of binary policy lived on in the way we supported universities through two separate streams of funding.

That was partly because we uncritically accepted the **idea** of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus and its consequence, the **idea of the university** as a site for the nexus. It was so taken-for-granted that, for the last 20 years, policymakers and managers have been obsessed either with how the post-1992 universities can get more money for research, or how to stop them getting more money for research and get them to concentrate on something else.

In all that time there has not been one convincing attempt to capture institutional diversity in a new policy idea. And the idea of the nexus has prompted an endless academic search for evidence to justify the belief that research and teaching must be linked for high quality higher education to be possible. Many perfectly acceptable higher education courses are run in places, like FE colleges, where there is little or no research, but no-one has suggested that

perhaps we aren't looking at the issue in the right way. But we aren't. We need a different idea.

We need to rethink management, to see it not as some top-down imposition on the university organisation, but as part of the architecture of the university. I have argued elsewhere for what I called 'natural management'. By 'natural management' I mean a value-driven approach to managing which is embedded in every part of the university and which therefore can cope with the anarchic loose coupling of different parts of the university, what Ron Barnett has called a 'mosaic on the move'. The organised anarchy of the moving mosaic can still have coherence and overall purpose if there is a shared sense of direction, a shared organisational culture, and a common discourse.

The deficiencies in how we think about managing become pernicious when they connect with higher-level policymaking. The scientific view leads to an impoverished idea of strategic management. It encourages strategies for almost everything, having a set of key performance indicators, doing Performance Management with a capital P and a capital M, and so on. It is part of the same disease as Government Modernisation.

It is that kind of thinking that has led HEFCE to reinforce our own mistaken obsession with research and teaching as primary concepts in thinking about universities. HEFCE required universities to produce strategy statements for teaching and learning, widening participation, finance, estates, personnel, and much more. Once all those things have been separately strategised, they have to be joined up again. But the way managerialists join things up is to look only at the cognitive domain, so that values and emotions get lost. And so you have the terrible paradox of a supposedly strategic vision which has lost sight of what higher education is for – the unpredictable growth of individual learners, the thrill of discovery, the excitement of debate and the clash of ideas.

The realities of the whole of academic practice - research, teaching and learning - have to be incorporated rather than ignored in the way that higher education is managed. Institution-wide strategies for teaching and learning, or for research, are at best semi-detached from each other and from the internal and external pressures which universities and their managers must accommodate. Teaching, learning and research need to be the foundation stones of the whole building, not separate annexes. Leadership and management should be part of the architecture of the organisation, not just the top floor where the furniture is more expensive and the carpets are deeper.

Not content with distorting how universities are managed, HEFCE started to tell universities how to think about overall direction and strategy. HEFCE produced its own strategic plan which set out four key objectives: research, teaching and learning, third stream activities, and widening participation. It said that universities should think about their own mission and overall strategy in the same terms. And no university could do all four, they should specialise by choosing one or two.

That kind of thinking led to the infamous 2003 White Paper, with its proposal for **teaching-only universities**. There was such an outcry that soon the Minister for Higher Education Bill Rammell was making speeches everywhere saying how important it was that all universities did both teaching and research. The academic establishment had reasserted the supremacy of the idea of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus. Nobody argued that the terms of the argument were wrong. But they are.

They are much more wrong now than they were when Robbins articulated them almost 50 years ago, because those old ideas have, as Keynes said, ramified into every corner of our thinking and our practice.

The particular problem is the excessive separation of teaching and research. Teaching and research are the primary **activities** in any university, but they are not its primary **purpose**. The sociologist Steve Fuller argues that the purpose of higher education is the destruction of social capital. I don't quite agree, because I think the purpose of inclusive mass higher education is to create new forms of social capital, rather than destroy the old forms. But you

don't have to agree to see that this is an example of a different, and preferable, way of construing purpose – in social, cultural and economic terms as well as in academic and educational terms. Teaching and research are not the **purposes** of higher education, they are the means to a higher purpose. We need to pay more explicit attention to that purpose, and if we did we would see that what matters is academic practice, not the division between different kinds of academic practice.

Thinking about teaching and research as separated activities seduces us into reinforcing the separation. For example, the idea of the 'student experience' which dominates policy thinking, and has even become the centrepiece of the Academy's mission statement, implicitly reinforces the supposed gold standard of the 18 or 19-year-old school-leaver with A-levels in residence at an elite university. Every other kind of student experience becomes defined as some kind of deficit model, to be excused, patronised or forgiven for its shortcomings.

The separation of teaching and research in the academic consciousness has led us to mistake what we do for the reasons why we do it. We need to think differently about purposes, and to do that we need to think differently about higher education activities themselves. In the final part of my argument, I want to suggest how we can do it.

### **Rethinking Higher Education**

The problem is the fragmentation of our perspective. One of the lesser-known founders of the London School of Economics, Halford Mackinder said: "Knowledge is one. Its division into subjects is a concession to human weakness."

Our knowledge of academic practice should be one. We have made concessions to academic weakness long enough. We have to stop thinking about teaching and research separately, and recreate a unified idea of academic practice. And we can do it by going back to Humboldt's better idea, the idea of academic freedom, in its full Humboldtian sense as applying equally to research **and** teaching.

Teaching and research have an asymmetrical relationship. Teaching, however good it is, does nothing for your academic reputation. Research, on the other hand, makes you famous and makes you a marketable academic commodity. The asymmetry is a problem for any higher education institution and any higher education system. In Britain we make it worse by separating the funding streams for teaching and research. That makes the reputational hierarchies steeper, it intensifies inter-institutional competition for resources, and it encourages academics and universities to fall into the trap of seeing teaching and research in competition with one another, instead of being interwoven.

As academics we are so obsessed with the prestige of research that we indulge in theoretical contortions to massage our self-esteem. Consider Boyer's 4 scholarships model, which has become the taken-for-granted paradigm for interpreting academic practice. Its dominance stems not from its achievement as a conceptual synthesis, but more for the politically inclusive way in which it enables us to place every HE institution and every academic somewhere on the scholarship map. It is a politically correct reformulation of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus idea. But using it submerges the status and hierarchy differentials which higher education itself reinforces – discovery is top, integration and engagement are lower, and the scholarship of teaching and learning is often near the bottom.

We have a problem when our dominant perspective on academic practice conceals rather than reveals some of the key issues we should be examining. We need a way of looking at academic practice more holistically.

Academic practice involves changing how people think, how they see the world. That's true not only in research, teaching and scholarship, but also – even more so - in management and policymaking. The key to improving and changing how we think is academic freedom, for research **and** for teaching.

## Academic Freedom

The Humboldtian ideal was what the American philosopher John Searle called a 'special theory' of academic freedom, something which claimed special privileges for the university in a repressive society. Searle said that with the spread of more liberal democratic regimes the special theory gave way to a 'general theory' of academic freedom, in which the freedom necessary for academic enquiry becomes less distinguishable from the general societal freedom of expression.

This makes the distinctiveness of the university, as a context for understanding the world, harder to pin down. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have Western Governments introducing identity cards, imprisoning people for years without charge, restricting civil liberties, and increasing surveillance of innocent citizens. We have commercial companies expanding their intellectual property, claiming even the human genome as their own. We have 24/7 media intrusion into our public and private lives. And we have the Internet, recording everything and making it universally accessible. Suddenly it is easier to see some differences between the classic freedom of academic enquiry and the modernised version of democratic liberty.

So we need to reconsider the merits of the idea of academic freedom as a special liberty, to be exercised only by those who can show an academic purpose which requires it. Academic freedom should be exercised only in defined contexts – which might mean contexts licensed by universities as sites for teaching or research, but increasingly includes commercial contexts licensed by Government. If we think of academic freedom in this way we can begin to rethink higher education – not by reinforcing the research-teaching-scholarship nexus, but by once again defining contexts in society which distinctively and disinterestedly pursue or promote understanding, and claim the intellectual freedom needed in that context to promote that understanding.

We need to work on the idea of academic freedom, to understand its dimensions and its range. We are nowadays so illiterate in terms of academic freedom that some academics think they have a right to make controversial statements on anything, whether or not it falls within their field of expertise. And others think they can censor research and comment just because they find it objectionable or politically incorrect, even though it is legal.

We need a 21<sup>st</sup> century idea of academic freedom. And that is much more important than deciding where and how to draw the boundary between teaching and research, and the boundaries between different kinds of scholarship. The four scholarships are not separated by those clear black lines in Boyer's diagram. They are completely interwoven. We need new ways of seeing the higher education world. I suggest we focus on the interplay between four ideas: academic practice; academic purpose; academic freedom; and academic context.

The narrowest freedom is associated with the narrowest purpose. In a commercial context where the purpose is high-level professional training, all you need is the freedom to draw on the results of other people's research to instruct trainees in developing work-related skills.

In an industrial research laboratory, where the purpose is commercial problem-solving or new product development, the freedom to conduct applied research and development means closer working relationships and exchange between university and industry academics, with correspondingly greater freedoms for the commercial researchers.

In a further education college the broader purpose of education for individual development calls for the freedom for teachers to express controversial opinions without fear of retribution.

And a university dedicated to expanding our understanding of the world, where academic practice covers all kinds of research as well as teaching, can still claim the widest kind of academic freedom, to teach, research and publish in a spirit of untrammelled intellectual enquiry.

If we do not pay close attention to the nature of academic freedom and its contingent justifications, we will damage what is most important for higher education. There may be good teaching and good research in both commercial and public higher education contexts, but they will draw some lines in different places. In general the narrower the academic purpose, the narrower the academic freedom.

So I propose that we stop focusing on teaching, research and scholarship. If we care about those things, and we want to respect and defend **all** the places where good research and teaching go on, we need to change our understanding of the academic world. The concepts of academic practice, academic freedom, academic purpose, and academic context can reunify higher education without homogenising it.

## Conclusion

Let me sum up. We should abandon the idea of the research-teaching-nexus. It has made us focus too much on **what** we teach, and on **how** we teach in a technical sense. We must pay more attention to **why** and **where** we conduct our academic practice. And we must pay more attention to **how** we do it in the sense not of technical proficiency but of moral proficiency – what our values are, and how we exercise our academic freedom responsibly. We need to replace the research-teaching-scholarship nexus with a broader idea of **higher education** which recognises the range of academic practice and the necessity of academic freedom, conditioned by purpose and context.

Let me illustrate what that different way of thinking about higher education might mean in practical terms.

HEFCE should stop trying to micromanage university strategy. Right now, diversity of mission degenerates into everyone aspiring to go up the university league tables by being more like the universities at the top – the ones which appear to most fully embody the research-teaching-scholarship nexus ideal. As long as there are T, R and third stream funding streams in their present proportions, this will not change. HEFCE should fund institutions by mission, not by breaking funds down into T and R.

Government should base policy on an idea of institutional mission which does not reinforce the research-teaching-scholarship nexus. This is a perfect fit with the Leitch agenda, but the price is the granting of academic freedom in a whole range of contexts which currently are beyond it, in particular the workplace. For example: in pursuing wider participation, rather than obsessing about working class students in the Russell Group, Government could define social inclusion as a problem for universities collectively to solve, by working together. That would encourage us to think about how to promote social inclusion through the whole range of academic practice, not just teaching, but also research, knowledge exchange and public service. That would shift attention away from the 3000 state school kids who don't get into the Russell group, and onto the 300,000 who do get a good higher education, but not in those universities. It would start to change the reputational hierarchy in higher education.

**QAA** should rewrite its codes of practice to reflect the degrees of academic freedom that are appropriate in different contexts and for different purposes. The audit question becomes: is this good enough in this context, for this purpose? **Not**: is this sufficiently like the mythical ideal gold standard course found in the research-teaching-scholarship nexus?

Higher education providers should be more subversive and more assertive in protecting their definition of academic practice, against the reductionist pressures of Government and its agencies. For example, it is debatable whether a university needs a separate learning and teaching strategy. A university needs an **academic strategy** for the whole of its academic practice. Whether it needs to break this down to smaller elements such as teaching or research should be an open question.

The Higher Education Academy should rewrite its mission to reflect its primary concern for teaching as part of integrated academic practice. Subject networks and institutions are

important, but within those subdivisions and beyond them the Academy should try to reintegrate academic practice in all its diverse contexts. To start with, perhaps a new stream of activities which explore the nature of academic freedom in teaching and the variety of forms it might take in diverse contexts, and with diverse groups of students.

And most importantly, academics need to face the consequences of their own rigid thinking, and change their ways. Do we need to stop thinking about teaching, and how we do it? No, of course not. We must keep reflecting on our teaching, to make it as good as we can. My argument is that we need to recontextualise how we pay attention to teaching. We need to pay more attention to the contexts in which teaching takes place, and not unthinkingly devalue all non-elite-university contexts. We need to pay less attention to our freedom to research and publish, and much more attention to how we use our academic freedom in teaching and in knowledge exchange, and whether there is enough of the right kind of freedom in all the contexts where academic work is done. We need to switch our research attention **away** from research-teaching linkages and **towards** developing a new idea of academic freedom, calibrated for context and purpose, to take the place in our minds of the idea of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus. We need to switch our teaching attention more towards the values which underpin our practice, and the way in which values, purposes and contexts interact. We need to reimagine academic practice as a unified whole, wherever and however it takes place. Only if we can do that will we be able to rethink higher education as it should be for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.