

Inspirations

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The Idea of a University¹

John Henry Newman

The Idea of a University is one of only two works (with Aristotle's *Ethics*) on education which should be preserved, the rest might, with no loss to humanity and possibly some advantage, be pulped. (Young, 1950: 165)

During 2018 the university sector entered choppy waters. First, following a century of steady, then four decades of spectacular growth, the proportion of school-leaver entrants fell, resulting in Russell Group universities having unfilled places and others announcing redundancies. Principally this was caused by high tuition fees and too few 'graduate-level' jobs; for example 40% of 1999 graduates are currently in semi- or low-skilled employment (Behle, 2016). Rarely now does securing a degree herald prosperity. Second, we learnt that since the mid-1990s the proportion of first-class degrees rose three-fold to 25%; three-quarters secure a first or 2:1 (Pells, 2017). PR spin claims this emanates from higher standards, but pre-eminently it derives from a managerialist desire to keep 'customers' happy and boost league-table 'outcomes'. Inflated marks generate 'excellent evaluations' for lecturers, courses and institutions;

¹ All page numbers in text relate to edition published by University of Notre Dame Press (1982). The book appeared by stages and as it did so the format altered. Based on ten lectures or discourses to be given in Dublin during 1852, however only five were delivered as Newman returned to London to defend himself against an accusation of libel. Incidentally he lost. The five were published as pamphlets. Newman then prepared for publication a text comprising all ten 'discourses'. Published in 1852 as *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education: Addressed to the Catholics of Dublin* then a second version appeared in 1859 as *The Scope and Nature of University Education* but this contained only eight discourses. Fourteen years on a third edition surfaced *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* this was divided into two parts one entitled 'University Teaching: Considered in Nine Discourses; the second 'Lectures and Essays on University Subjects'. The second section usually comprises ten 'essays' however but some editions contain fewer. *The Idea of a University* has not been out of print since the 1860s. Confusingly the *Everyman's Library* edition, still available, is based on the 1859 edition, therefore it contains just eight discourses.

so better flatter students than confront them with academic rigour. Ultimately exaggerated marks only contribute to all degrees being devalued. Third, in November *Panorama* broadcast footage of university places, essays, even degrees, seemingly being sold, not for sycophantic evaluations, but cash. Fourth, the question of deceit resurfaced when the Advertising Standards Authority ordered some universities to withdraw dishonest adverts relating to courses. And shortly afterwards, the National Audit Office announced that, if universities were banks, they would be investigated for ‘mis-selling’. Finally, a long-running scandal coursed through 2017 involving the eye-watering salaries and expenses vice-chancellors paid themselves and their cronies, whilst colleagues’ wages were ‘capped’, and students struggled to pay their way through university. This unseemly tale of vulgar avarice confirmed that university managers, with few exceptions, believe greed is good and selfishness should be the *raison d’etre* of an educated individual.

It is impossible to envisage anyone less like our avaricious self-serving vice-chancellors than Newman, who always lived modestly, including when he ran the Catholic University in Dublin. Paying himself a pittance, and believing a university must strive to be a community – ‘an Alma Mater knowing her children one by one’ (p.109) – he lived with students in an unprepossessing house. Apart from managing the University, Newman taught classes, gave public lectures, delivered regular sermons, wrote over fifty articles for the student newspaper *The Catholic University Gazette* including a noteworthy series on the historical development of universities (published as *The Office and Work Universities*), and authored *The Idea of a University*.

Talk of a crisis is premature for the Behemoth will lumber on. However, these ‘difficulties’ highlight the absence of a moral compass within a sector which, like a besotted Basset Hound, seems trained solely to pursue the scent of money. This cocktail of high salaries, payment by results and heavy-handed management fosters a culture of servility which marginalises critical voices and advocates of reform. Thankfully there is, as always, another route. Certainly, anyone disheartened by the current direction of travel could do worse than read Newman’s timeless text.

Magnificently crafted, it serves up a cogent alternative. It reminds us that the current model, wedded to training for the workplace, rote learning, top-down management, and the segmentation of knowledge into sealed modular units is not our only option. Opponents may dismiss Newman as a naysayer, a worrywart whose views are *passé*, but for those desirous of a sector founded upon something more nuanced than the cash nexus Newman provides a rich seam of ideas.

An invitation

Few are called to found a university, but in 1852 Newman was. The invitation came from Archbishop Cullen of Armagh, Primate of Ireland to found a Catholic university in Dublin modeled on Leuven, established in 1835. By then, Newman was already an intellectual force, having authored numerous works on theology, history and philosophy, plus an unreadable novel. A. N. Wilson (1999) judges him to be Britain's only monumentally great nineteenth century religious writer. Nowadays it is difficult to grasp the extent to which religious disputes and theological questions attracted widespread public interest during the nineteenth century. But they did, and few religious 'controversies' received more attention than the decision in 1845 of Newman, a prominent member of the Oxford Movement, to leave the Anglican Church and become a Roman Catholic.

Newman was possibly the only suitable candidate for the job; certainly Cullen thought so, and actively sought to persuade him to take on a university without buildings, staff or students. Catholics, prior to 1829, were prevented from attending British universities. Consequently Newman, who before his conversion was an Oxford Fellow for 20 years, was possibly the only Catholic cleric with substantial experience of teaching in a UK university. It also helped that Newman loved to teach – be it adult classes, Sunday schools, university students or school pupils. So, when Cullen asked if he would deliver 'a few lectures on education' when he arrived in Dublin, Newman readily agreed.

Newman selected the topic but not his audience, which posed a challenge. If the new university was to prosper, he must overcome the antagonism of many attendees. In

essence, the opposition comprised three clusters. First, those who considered the ‘project’ unworthy of prioritization, especially five years after the onset of *The Great Hunger* that resulted in a million deaths and the migration of an equivalent number, which led to Ireland’s population falling by a quarter between 1846 and 1852. Second, came those who viewed it as unnecessary after “Queen’s Colleges” opened in Belfast, Cork and Galway in 1845 which applied no religious tests regarding entry. Each operated according to ‘mixed education’ principles which prohibited religious instruction and the teaching of Theology. Given these institutions enabled Catholic men (women were admitted in the 1880s) to embark on a university education, they secured widespread backing, including from some clergy. Third, were those unhappy with Newman’s appointment – either because he was an unproven convert, or for nationalistic reasons; the *Young Irelander Rebellion* of 1848 remained fresh in many minds, fostering tensions between supporters and opponents of independence. Most nationalists wanted a university free of governmental interference, but with an Irishman in charge.

Whatever the causation, this animosity meant Newman had to exploit the opportunity created by the lectures to allay his opponents’ qualms. Consequently, the early *Discourses* addressed issues that were exercising their minds. So, he presents his qualifications for the job, rambles on about the historic links between the Irish and English Churches, and reminds his audience this project has the Pope’s blessing. He then devotes considerable wordage to justifying Theology’s place within a university. Newman feared he had tried his reader’s patience in those early sections, for at the close of *Discourse Three* he assures them he is now ‘bringing a somewhat tedious discussion to a close’ (p.52). His predicament means that contemporary readers approaching the text unprepared may ask ‘what is the point of all this?’ Some may even cast it aside. That would be a pity, for this is amongst our finest books on education.

Newman was also obligated to address other issues. First, the question of ‘what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ (Gilley, 1990: 293). In other words, the inherent friction between Hellenist and Judaea-Christian traditions: between reason and faith,

knowledge and religion. Second, was the debate then raging regarding ‘useful’ versus ‘useless’ knowledge. After centuries of tranquility, a rash of new universities, besides Dublin’s Catholic University and the ‘Queens Colleges’, opened in the UK between 1827 and 1850, including half-a-dozen in England. Their arrival provoked a sustained public debate concerning the university’s role in an ‘industrial’ society. By 1850 a new orthodoxy emerged that discarded the ‘Oxonian’ traditions that prioritized a liberal education and the college ‘experience’. Instead, it gave precedence to the teaching of ‘useful knowledge’ and ‘specialisms’, delivered via modules, designed to prepare students for employment in commercial and industrial professions as well as medicine and law. Moreover, students attending the new universities usually lived at home or in lodgings. Newman had scant sympathy for what he termed ‘utility’, fearing it fostered ‘viewness’, wherein graduates of those institutions acquired a great number of unintegrated opinions, but emerged limited and uncultivated. Newman’s enmity to this model shaped much of the book’s content.

Setting out

Newman always endeavoured to push ‘things up to their first principles’ which he held was a ‘principal portion of a good or liberal education’ (p. 123). In keeping with this *modus operandi* he commenced by asking what should be the ‘direct end of a university’. His response was:

That it is a place of *teaching* universal knowledge. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be a seat of literature and science. (p. xxxvii)

The university’s task was to teach students to think, be sceptical, questioning and excited by new ideas; to train their intellects and not to manipulate their moral character. Given the focus on teaching students (without whom the university would not exist), the transmission and dissemination of knowledge and ideas had to enjoy precedence over research. The centre of attention might be upon the student’s

learning, but this was not in order to boost their future earnings but, rather, to offer them a 'liberal education'. Liberal, in this instance, was derived from the Latin *liberalis* meaning 'befitting a free man'; an education that would enable them to fulfill the role of a responsible active citizen in a democratic society, to be 'a good member of society' (p. 134). Achieving this required a

True enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence. (p. 106)

Liberal education was not 'useless knowledge' for 'although the useful is not always good, the good is always useful' (p. 124). Irrespective of the role students might come to perform in society, a liberal education guarantees they possess the bedrock upon which they can amass their professional knowledge; plus it ensures they acquire the critical capacity to act in socially responsible ways. Having 'learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze, who has refined his taste, and formed his judgment, and sharpened his mental vision' although they will not overnight be equipped to be a '... lawyer or physician, or good landlord ... or engineer ... he will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any one of the sciences or callings With an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger' (p.125).

Newman contrasts a liberal education which imparts a 'real cultivation of the mind' with one that grooms individuals for servitude and 'servile work' (p. 80). Here is a standpoint akin to that of Paulo Freire, who reminds educators they must always choose between the pedagogies of liberation and oppression. Newman recoiled from the concept of universities functioning as a 'foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill' (p. 109); manufacturing students for allotted slots in the labour market. Vocational instruction must occur after the university has educated its graduates 'to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it' (p. 95). Those educated within the narrow confines of a professional route, be it community work,

accountancy, pharmacy or whatever, Newman feared, risked acquiring a ‘constrained and contracted mind’. As the body can be ‘sacrificed to some manual labour or toil’ (p. 125) so, Newman reminds us, can the mind be similarly forfeited.

A liberal education was essential if students were to be liberated from what Plato called *daxa*, or opinion, by teaching them to recognize it, question it and grasp the alternatives. The tutor’s task was not to fill student’s minds with hand-me-down knowledge and shed-loads of facts, but to enlarge their minds, so they might know how to use knowledge, assess it, critique it and move seamlessly from the particular to the general. In a verdant passage, Newman offers a eulogy to this vision of the trained mind prepared for the vagaries of life and the world beyond the university:

The intellect, which has been disciplined the perfection of its powers, ... which has learned to leaven the dense mass of facts and events with the elastic force of reason, such an intellect cannot be partial, cannot be exclusive, cannot be impetuous, cannot be at a loss, cannot but be patient, collected, and majestically calm ... It is the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things, as far as the finite mind can embrace them ... It is almost prophetic from its knowledge of history; it is almost heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; it has almost super-natural clarity from its freedom from littleness and prejudice; it has almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres.(p. 104)

Putting the case

Besides setting out his educational stall, Newman, in the *Preface* and early *Discourses*, addresses the topic of who should ‘control’ not only Dublin’s new university but all universities. Newman argues neither Church nor state, even if they are the funders, should do so. The Church, or an employer in similar circumstances, may be entitled to oversee the syllabus and admissions of a ‘training’ establishment, but that authority cannot be replicated regarding a university; as ‘the very name of

University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind' (p. 15). Academic freedom, Newman believed, was never negotiable. Neither staff nor students should be excluded because others found their morals or beliefs unpalatable. By definition, a university must 'admit, without fear, without prejudice, without compromise, all, if they come in the name of Truth' (p. 344). It is in part thanks to individuals like Newman that religious meddling is no longer a substantive threat to academic freedom in the UK. However, incursions do remain a problem. Certainly he would be alarmed by the ways in which UK governments have sought to micro-manage universities via the use of legislation, funding mechanisms and league-tables, in order to make them prioritize commercial outcomes at the expense of educational ones. In countries such as China, Turkey or Saudi Arabia the scale of governmental intrusion makes it foolhardy, if one employs Newman's criteria, to even describe their higher education institutions as 'universities'. This raises pertinent questions regarding the probity of UK universities operating satellites in countries where authoritarian regimes deny their citizens 'freedom of speech and assembly'. Worryingly, if these universities are happy to tack their sails to accommodate such regimes, we can rest assured they lack the backbone to resist any similar pressures which a more autocratic British government might exert upon them at some future date.

The early *Discourses* also discuss the embargo placed upon Theology within 'Queen's Colleges'. Newman's opposition was not a case of a priest's 'special pleading', for he consistently advocated that universities should be secular institutions. Rather, it arises from a belief that this policy undermined a commitment to the Aristotelian concept of 'universal knowledge'. Whereby a university,

.. by its very name professes to teach universal knowledge: Theology is surely a branch of knowledge: how then is it possible for it to profess all branches of knowledge, and yet to exclude from the subjects of its teaching one which, to say the least, is as important and as large as any of them? I do not see that either premise of this argument is open to exception. As to the range of University teaching, certainly the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind. (p.14-15)

When appraising a discipline, be it Theology or any other, we should recollect ‘the mind never views any part ... without recollecting that it is but a part’ (p. 104) and that, as such, it contributes to our understanding of the whole. Failure to do this leads to giving: ‘undue prominence to one’ and thereby unsettling ‘the boundary that lies between science and science’ (p. 76). All students benefit from understanding something of the insights, methods and values of other disciplines. For Newman to exclude a discipline, for whatever reason, erodes the foundations upon which a university is based, and denies students access to fields of knowledge and modes of thinking that are essential for the ‘cultivation of the mind’. Therefore ‘to blot out’ Theology, or another subject that provides the building blocks of a liberal education,

...is nothing short ... of unraveling the web of University Teaching. It is, according to the Greek proverb, to take spring out of the year. (p. 53)

Newman argued for Theology’s presence against opponents who ‘removed’ it to lessen religious antagonism towards secular provision. Nowadays, subjects are rarely expunged for a principled reason – only on grounds of ‘cost’. Expensive subjects requiring laboratories, placements or small group teaching are most at risk, as are arduous ones that tend to attract fewer students. Gradually, those subjects that once provided a ‘liberal education’ fade, to be replaced by courses which either make dubious claims to offer heightened employment opportunities or promise a less arduous route to graduate status. Much as the loss of plant and animal species damages our bio-diversity in ways not immediately apparent, so the purging of key subjects injures the health of our intellectual life and the richness of the university experience. As Newman explained, just

...as the combination of colours, very different effects are produced by a difference in the selection and juxta-position; red, green, and white, change their shades, according to the contrast to which they are submitted. And, in like manner, the drift and meaning of a branch of

knowledge varies with the company in which it is introduced to the student. (p. 75)

Of course no student can study every subject. But that matters not. The point is that, by embracing the full circle of knowledge, the university allows them to brush up against subjects and alternative ways of viewing the world. Once you remove one of the core elements of a liberal education, the circle of knowledge contracts and that subject's contribution to those that remain is lost. Soon it recedes from sight, so that staff and students will cease to be enriched by direct or indirect contact with it, and are even less likely to draw upon its philosophical and intellectual heritage. Each removal means students are less likely to learn to respect other intellectual traditions or apprehend

...the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little.
(p. 76)

It is this inter-play that makes a university unique, setting it apart from mono-technic institutions, places of professional training and technical colleges.

In the remaining *Discourses* Newman refines his earlier advocacy of the university as a place devoted to the propagation of universal knowledge and the 'education of the intellect ... to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it' (p. 94-5) whilst attending to a number of new topics; notably, whether a university should restrict access to texts and topics taught and debated; the place of research; and the nature of what would nowadays be dubbed the 'student experience'. Regarding the first, Newman held that universities must never censor or stage-manage student entrée to knowledge. For the study of mankind demands we recognise that humans exercise their 'various gifts in various ways, in great deeds, in great thoughts, in heroic acts, in hateful crimes' (p. 175). To understand the breadth of life and the full sweep of history nothing must be kept from the student. As Newman reminded his paymasters, a university 'is not a convent ... not a seminary; it is a place to fit men of the world

for the world (p. 177). Not an institution established to ‘make’ Christians or followers of any creed or ideology but somewhere tasked with developing ‘a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind’ (p. 91). A university and its members must search without prejudice for ‘truth of every kind, physical, metaphysical, historical, and moral’ (p.39) wherever it is to be encountered. This requires setting aside individual sensitivities and conceding that ‘knowledge is one thing, virtue is another’ (p. 104); accordingly, teaching the former, never the latter, must be their foremost business. Furthermore, he warned that to pretend a liberal education, let alone a university education, will of itself produce virtuous people is a foolish deceit. Newman dismisses the notion one can ‘teach’ such attributes as sanctity, virtue or conscientiousness, let alone inculcate morality, as delusional; one might as well

....quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; than you may hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man. (p. 91)

Although the doors are to be flung wide-open to all ideas, we must not fear those with which we disagree, let alone exclude those who promulgate them. As he argued in a subsequent lecture, *Christianity and Scientific Investigation* must always, however difficult it might be, hold ‘firm’ to our belief in the sovereignty of Truth. Error may flourish for a time, but Truth will prevail in the end’ so that ‘the only effect of error ultimately is to promote Truth’ (p. 366). In a delightful aside, he reassures us that ‘error is like other delinquents: give it rope enough, and it will be found to have a strong suicidal propensity’ (p. 351). This commitment to free discussion and dialogue sits ill with the ‘no platform’ position and lecturers issuing ‘trigger signals’ before discussing topics some students might find upsetting or offensive. If you fear being ‘damaged’ or offended by an encounter with an idea or topic you ought not to pass through the portals of a university. Like a slaughter-house it is not somewhere for those with a squeamish temper of mind.

Second, Newman argues in the *Preface* that a university's primary end is teaching, not research – something best left to discrete academies, laboratories, practical men and women, and dedicated researchers, all operating elsewhere. Of course, learners' best learn from a learner, and any lecturer worth employing will persistently seek to expand their subject knowledge and advance its boundaries, but for Newman their priority must always be their teaching. Central to Newman's rationale is the danger posed by a researcher's need to compartmentalize knowledge and focus on ever smaller and more manageable components, a process at odds with the need for a liberal education to broaden the student's conception of knowledge. He accepts benefits are derived from specialisation for 'there can be no doubt that every art is improved by confining the professor of it to that single study'. However, this gain is secured at a cost for 'although the art itself is advanced by this concentration of mind in its service, the individual who is confined to it goes back' (p. 127). Newman argues 'to discover and to teach are distinct functions; they are also distinct gifts, and are not commonly found united in the same person' (p. xl). Moreover, whilst teaching 'involves external engagements, the natural home for experiment and speculation is retirement' (p. xli). Consequently, undergraduates are generally an unwelcome distraction to the dedicated researcher,

Current obsessions with securing research funding and 'points' have undeniably had a detrimental impact on teaching. Less documented is the damage they wreak upon research. Universities are indifferent to research in terms of any contribution it might make to the wider advancement of knowledge; their sole interested lies with the income it generates. When funding ends, irrespective of its intrinsic value, the research ceases. Overwhelmingly, the funding piper determines what research occurs. Academics therefore focus their 'critical' gaze not upon society's dark corners or the greatest areas of need, but on cosy topics that funders are comfortable with. Predictably, governments, businesses and big charities fund research that flatters them or promises them a dividend, never anything that threatens to discomfort them. So academics play safe and leave the risky research to others. For example, it was not academics from business and accountancy departments who uncovered the tax avoidance documented in the Panama and Paradise Papers, but investigative

journalists. Neither did social work lecturers expose the abuse of vulnerable adults in care homes or young people in Secure Training Centres; again it was reporters and whistleblowers. Self-evidently not all research undertaken within universities is a waste of money, but much is and, moreover, when one takes into account the ‘add-ons’, it could often be done cheaper by outside agencies. If we are serious about advancing knowledge and shining a light into societies’ uninviting crannies, then we could do worse than contemplate afresh Newman’s model.

Finally, Newman believed a university must be a living community where young people come together to learn from one another as well as from their tutors. This approach requires academics to spend substantial periods of time with and alongside their students; socialising with them in ways that allow conversation and dialogue to flourish so that, by example, they acquire a love of learning and respect for education. Newman held that such relationships were critical and that ‘an academical system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils, is an Arctic winter’ (1856/1909, 74). Tutors must strive to create by a self-perpetuating tradition, or a *genius loci*, that ensures that when...

...keen, open-hearted, sympathetic and observant [students] come together and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn one from another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting, day by day. (p. 110)

The formation of such a place, rather than the contemporary conveyor-belt that views students as individual customers purchasing a qualification, should surely be our ambition. To create

...a youthful community [that] will constitute a whole, it will embody a specific idea, it will represent a doctrine, it will administer a code of conduct, and it will furnish principles of thought and action. It will give

birth to a living teaching, which in course of time will take the shape of a self-perpetuating tradition, or a *genus loci*, as it is sometimes called; which haunts the home where it has been born, and which imbues and forms, more or less, and one by one, every individual who is successively brought under its shadow. (p.111)

This vision of what a university might strive towards is far removed from the department store model, founded upon possessive individualism which sells learning as a commodity for personal consumption.

Conclusion

What *The Idea of a University* fails to convey is how Newman applied in practice the principles he articulated within the book. From the outset, he fought all-comers to ensure freedom of speech and open access were maintained. The Catholic University of Ireland admitted its first student in 1854 and within weeks Cullen was writing to the Vatican grumbling about Newman. Cullen's first letter complained that

... the discipline introduced is unsuitable, certainly to this country. The young men are allowed to go out at all hours, to smoke, etc. and there has not been any fixed time for study. All this makes it clear that Father Newman does not give attention to details. (Cornwell, 2010: 137)

Then followed a series of letters, again from Cullen, instructing him not to appoint anyone with even a tenuous link to the "Young Irelanders" movement; Newman ignored these and appointed whomsoever he judged to be best qualified. Moreover, he created a uniquely open institution. Staff, including himself, were expected to give their lectures to students during the day then repeat them 'in a popular format' in the evening for working men and women who attended without charge. Here we encounter possibly the earliest 'extra-mural' provision in the UK as well as the first university programme to admit women. The lecture halls were filled with eager learners, many of whom asked Newman to allow them to study part-time for a degree. Consequently in 1858, shortly before he resigned, Newman supervised the passing of

a statute which enabled those attending evening classes to sit exams and graduate. Newman was a practical reformer with an abiding love of teaching. But his finest achievement as an educator is probably *The Idea of a University* for, as Chadwick put it, ‘no one ever sang a lovelier song in praise of education for its own sake’ (1983: 56).

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