

‘A Place of Universal Learning’: the Purposes of the Modern University

The Inaugural Lecture of Professor Philip Nolan as President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

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A Chathaoirligh, a mhuintir na hOllscoile, a chomhghleacaithe agus a chairde, is mór an onóir domsa agus don ollscoil sibh a bheith i láthair anseo inniu. Is mór an phribhléid agus is mór an fhreagracht é ollscoil a stiúradh, agus tá mé fíorbhuíoch díbh as an gcomhartha tacaíochta atá sibh a léiriú agus sibh ag freastal ar mo léacht tionscnaimh anseo inniu. Is tráth an-speisialta é seo dom féin agus dóibh siúd a chabhraigh liom a bheith anseo. Is tráth é a thugann deis dom an rud a chreidim go daingean a fhógairt don saol: go bhfuil sé de chumas ag an léann agus ag an scoláireacht saol an duine a athrú, agus an tsochaí a athrú tríd is tríd, agus go leagann an cumas sin, an chumhacht sin, freagracht ollmhór orainn mar scoláirí agus mar oidí.

Chairperson, members of the university, colleagues and friends, your presence here today does me, and the university, a signal honour. It is a great privilege and a great responsibility to lead a university, and your coming here today is a gesture of support which is greatly appreciated. This is a very special moment for me, and those who have helped me to be here. It is an opportunity to say something meaningful, something in which I sincerely believe. And what I have chosen to say is this: learning and scholarship have the power to

change lives and to transform society, and that power places enormous responsibilities on us as scholars and teachers.

I want to begin with a reflection. The Irish Historic Towns Atlas describes Maynooth in 1901 as a prosperous small town, as the census data showed “*when measured as persons to a room, there was little overcrowding, except for one part of Parson’s Street*”. This is the census form for a house on that part of Parson’s Street, a house I can see from my office; it records 10 people living in two rooms, including my infant grandfather, Stephen. Three generations and a little over one hundred years later, I stand before you as President of a university that grew on his doorstep, but he could never have hoped to enter.

I say this not to claim humble origins, or establish a connection with a town that is new to me. I say it because it is illustrative. First, the story of this family, as for many families, is a story of educational attainment, each generation building upon the achievements of the last. Second, it shows how far we have come as a society in such a short period of time. Whatever our current difficulties, we are living in one of the oldest democracies in the world, an emerging nation that has carried its people an extraordinary distance, to a place in history of which its founding generation barely dared dream. Third, it reminds us that the great higher education institutions exist and grow and develop and change over centuries; Maynooth was a centre of higher learning in one form 100 years before my grandfather was born,

is in a different form now, and will be, in yet another form, 100 years after my death.

This simple document serves to remind us that education changes lives, that its effects last for generations, and that institutions transcend generations. It serves to remind us of our responsibilities, to those who went before us and gave so much to build what we have today, and to those who will follow, whose lives and life chances depend on our labours, our choices and our judgement. It serves to remind us that our actions have lasting consequences, so that the work of building, changing or reforming institutions should be approached with an appropriate mix of enthusiasm and humility, scepticism and respect, urgency and caution.

But we live in extraordinary times, times of profound economic and social crisis, and accelerated cultural change. People are turning to higher education institutes for action, answers, solutions, support, guidance and critique. We have no option but to adapt, to redouble our efforts to meet the needs of the society we serve, and to do so quickly. It is in this context, conscious of our duty of care to this and to future generations, that I ask what are the purposes of the university, and how should they be pursued?

Let me say at the outset that I believe higher education is, now more than ever, about innovation, jobs and economic growth, and that we must address this purpose with urgency and with energy.

We should, however, give the matter some thought. How do we go about creating an innovation society? What sorts of knowledge, what sorts of people and what sorts of social conditions are required if we are to be innovative and entrepreneurial? What do we as higher education institutions need to do, or do better, or stop doing to provide this knowledge, develop people in these ways, or create these conditions? The answers to these questions are, in my view, neither easy nor trivial, nor are they contained in something new or fashionable. Rather, I think what is required is a return to the fundamental principles and values of higher learning.

One difficulty is that innovation is a slippery concept. We use the word widely and with approbation, a panacea for our present difficulties, without really understanding what it means. The sociologist Nico Stehr, from whose ideas I will be drawing extensively in this lecture, puts it in the following terms

“There are hardly any other words in any language that are as frequently employed as in innovation. Perhaps innovation, at this stage, can compete with democracy and knowledge. All three terms are hard to define. Nor are there many words that consistently meet with such partiality and approval as innovation. Innovation has strong normative connotations. If I put it more formally, the term innovation performs the speech-act of commending what it tries to describe”

This is not intended to be a cynical comment; I passionately believe that the capacity to innovate, to change and to develop, is essential to our success as a society, now more than ever, but as a result we have a duty to think carefully about what it is, and how it might be fostered.

We tend to see innovation in very narrow terms, in terms of the application of new knowledge, or the development of technical solutions, or the transfer of an existing solution to a new problem, or the identification of some new opportunity, through the agency of an entrepreneurial actor.

However, innovation is a social as much as a technical process. The truth is, that much of our lives are lived through habitual or learned responses, reinforced by societal norms. We do so many things in particular ways because that is the way it has always been done, or that is the way we are taught to do it, or that is the way everyone we know does it. There is sound reason for this. It provides tried and tested solutions to known problems, which often work well for new ones. And it underpins social order, so that our actions generate the expected responses, and social interactions proceed along predictable or at least manageable lines.

When so much of our lives, and our social order, is essentially conservative or habitual, innovation faces technical obstacles and social resistance. Think what is required for an individual or group of individuals to do things differently, to innovate. There are the personal attributes of the innovators: they have a deep knowledge of

the problem, they have the technical skills to develop new solutions and implement them, but above all they can analyse, reflect, think critically, appreciate different ways of thinking, see and articulate new possibilities. Not only can they think and do, but they can think differently and act differently. And this is only half the story. Innovation occurs in a socio-cultural context, and the social and cultural conditions must support the innovators. They must have access to knowledge and expertise, the ability to question, to speak out and to dissent, the autonomy and discretion to behave differently.

The society that supports extensive innovation, the innovation society if you will, is, therefore, one built on open access to knowledge and universal capacity to act and to participate, a society which is self-critical and reflective, which encourages questioning and contestation, which values difference and tolerates dissent, and which, as a result, is in constant flux, changing, correcting itself and improving. It is essentially democratising, a force for good, and a path to a sustainable future.

What, then, is the role of higher education in creating the innovation society: what must be our functions, what purposes must we serve? Fundamentally, we address all three dimensions of innovation: the technical the personal, and the social.

First, we generate new knowledge, and conserve the old; and not merely conserve, but revisit, revitalise and re-evaluate, knowing that the old serves as the foil to, the test of and the genesis of the new.

Second, we are a place of learning. We furnish our graduates not just with knowledge and skills, but with the capacity to reflect, to analyse, to reason, to articulate and to argue, and we give them the confidence and the courage to act, to challenge, to contest and if necessary, to defy.

Third, we have a duty to engage with the world, with the problems of real people, real enterprise and real communities, applying and diffusing our knowledge, enabling and empowering, and through the process of engagement and application, gaining new insights and new understanding.

Fourth, we are central to the creation of the social and cultural conditions that support innovation and democracy. We embody an open society. We have the capacity and the obligation to question received wisdom, challenge authority, stimulate debate, encourage dialogue, embrace diversity, and be a model of tolerance, and through these practices, diffuse these norms and behaviours through society. Knowledge, learning, democracy and innovation are fundamentally interdependent. Knowledge, learning and innovation can only flourish in a free and open society, and yet they are essential to ensuring its freedom and openness.

These four functions share a common purpose: to create a society where people not only see and understand the world as it is, but see and understand what it can be, and have the capacity to change it for the better.

These are not novel as a list of purposes of higher education – you could have rehearsed them yourself: to teach, to research, to engage, to be an institution of democratic society. The problem is, how do we perform these functions in such a way, and to such a standard, that our knowledge and our graduates and our institutions are capable of changing the world?

When searching for an answer, I find myself returning time and time again to the writings of John Henry Newman. I have come to believe that the answer lies in a reaffirmation and extension of the principles that informed his vision for a university, in a return to the fundamental values of liberal education and free and untrammelled enquiry.

You might find it unusual that I would draw on Newman in the course of arguing that creating an innovative and entrepreneurial society is a fundamental purpose of the university. It is commonly held that Newman saw education entirely as an end in itself, and should not serve to useful or practical ends. Many think his writings idealistic dated and no longer relevant.

I disagree, and find much to draw on today from the vision of a university he articulated over 150 years ago.

First, the very intellectual attributes that Newman espoused as the result of a liberal education are the same as those I have already argued are essential for innovation.

“Liberal education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect....to open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression”

Second, just as I have argued that innovation is a social process, Newman’s vision for a university is also profoundly social. The university is not a place of teaching, it is a place of learning, and Newman’s vision is not to create a teaching institution, but to create a learning community. The characteristics of this community are worthy of note. The community is diverse:

“A University is a place of concourse, whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge”

This diversity is not an epiphenomenon, it is essential to the process of learning. Newman, with characteristic rhetorical flourish goes so far as to say that he would prefer *“a University which had no professors or examinations at all”* arguing that students from diverse backgrounds and cultures would, through the natural conflict between their different cultural perspectives, practices and assumptions, have so much to learn from each other without the intervention of formal teachers

“...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 ... for the pupils or students come from very different places, and with widely different notions”

The social requirements for learning, and the potential for learning in the interaction of different cultures are, for me, directly analogous to the social requirements for innovators and the power of cultural difference to stimulate innovation. Newman’s learning community is the innovation society in microcosm.

Third, Newman did not see liberal education merely as an intellectual pursuit with no object. Yes, he saw liberal education as an end in itself; but he also believed was a better and lasting path to utility, technological advancement and professional skill, because it engendered the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and novel problems, which an education bent to the immediate utilitarian objectives of the day could not.

He anticipated a criticism which you may well have of this lecture: that rarefied discourses on liberal education are of limited practical value in an economic crisis. He mounted a robust defence of fundamental educational values, which if you will indulge me I will quote in full, because it is so resonant with much current criticism of

higher education, and because he provides a response that is so much more eloquent than I ever could.

“They insist that education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if every thing, as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making education and instruction "useful," and "utility" becomes their watchword. With a fundamental principle of this nature, they very naturally go on to ask, what there is to show for the expense of a University; what is the real worth in the market of the article called "a liberal education," on the supposition that it does not teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures, or to improve our lands, or to better our civil economy; or again, if it does not at once make this man a lawyer, that an engineer, and that a surgeon; or at least if it does not lead to discoveries in chemistry, astronomy, geology, magnetism, and science of every kind.”.

You would think he had been reading last week-ends newspapers. His response is a powerful defence of the value of education:

“and the man who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze ... will not indeed at once be a lawyer, or a pleader, or an orator, or a

statesman, or a physician, or a good landlord, or a man of business, or a soldier, or an engineer, or a chemist, or a geologist, or an antiquarian, but he will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any one of the sciences or callings I have referred to, or any other for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger. In this sense then ... mental culture is emphatically useful”

A liberal education gives the graduate capacities, intellectual skills and lifelong habits of mind that go to the very heart of innovation and entrepreneurship.

There is a widespread belief that Newman did not see the university as a place of research. I do not have time to address this in detail, but must say that nothing could be further from the truth. He believed that the advancement of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge were inextricably linked. He saw them both as learning processes, conducted in learning communities, and that the practical utility of both was enhanced, not diminished, by being pursued as ends in themselves rather than being directed towards immediate utilitarian goals.

Far from being an abstract aspiration, Newman’s vision for a university is a practical, if extremely challenging, guide to creating a university that will serve as an engine of innovation and economic

growth, an important institution of a democratic society and a guardian of all that is fine in human culture.

He acts as a guide to what we must do. We must work assiduously to advance and to disseminate knowledge. We must foster in graduates the fundamental intellectual skills of analysis, reflection, critique and expression, and the personal attributes of commitment, confidence and courage. He offers a guide as to how to achieve these: more important than research programmes or curricula, the essence of the university is the community it establishes.

“A University is a place of concourse, whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge”

The learning community is diverse, multicultural, international. The primary mode of learning is each from the other. It is marked by openness, tolerance, debate and fierce contestation. It challenges our knowledge, our received wisdom, our cultural assumptions, and allows us to see the world with fresh eyes and a questioning mind.

Equally, it is clear what we should not do. Newman explicitly warns of the dangers of an exclusive focus on narrow skills in immediate demand, or devoting ourselves to the application of knowledge we already have, or confining our research to questions of projected practical value, or imagining that science alone holds the key to economic and social progress. If we choose this path, we may achieve some short-term gains, but they will not be sustained, or

sustainable, and in the process we will have lost the social capacity and cultural equipment to address the unknowable problems of the future and to renew ourselves as a society.

I am clearly arguing that higher education institutions in general, and universities in particular, must direct themselves towards higher and distant goals in order best to serve society today and tomorrow. This address is not a conservative defence of the university as it is, nor is it an excuse for complacency, it is a challenge and a call for radical action. The realisation of the ideal university I have described is an extraordinary task, and we have a moral duty to address ourselves the task.

I strongly believe in and will robustly defend the need for academic institutions to be autonomous, and free to act autonomously, if they are to prosper. I would go further to say that policy interventions by those with little or no experience of teaching or research can be profoundly damaging. But autonomy is the freedom to act, not a license for inaction, and our future requires that we be trenchantly self-critical, and committed to continuous adaptation, change and improvement.

The final portion of this lecture is an exercise in self-criticism. It looks at where we are, and the road ahead, and asks: what prevents us realising the idea of a university as a vibrant place of learning and a source of innovation.

The challenges we face are manifold, and I will highlight just four, for they seem to me the most important and the most difficult.

First, there is the reality of mass participation in higher education. We have moved in one generation from a situation where less than 10% of the age cohort entered higher education to now, where over half of school leavers pursue a third level programme.

This welcome diversity presents two difficult problems, simply put:

- how do we teach so many students; and,
- how do we fund their participation.

The issue of funding is straightforward: it must be funded publicly through taxation, or privately through fees or loans, or both. But it must be funded. Equivocation on this issue has done lasting damage to our institutions and our students, and we are foolish to imagine that our failure to adequately and decisively provide for higher education will result in anything other than a inevitable mediocrity to the detriment of generations of students.

The issue of teaching and learning in mass higher education, no matter how well it is funded, is an extremely difficult one. We must ask ourselves a hard question – what are we doing to ensure each and every one of these students, with their diverse backgrounds, abilities, interests, goals and aspirations, benefits fully from their time in higher education. How much have we adapted to their individual needs, or

we largely offer them all the same thing, failing to challenge the able, or to support the struggling, inevitably aiming for the average. Do we cling to old models of teaching, because we cannot find ways to change, or do not have the courage to do so? Do our students graduate with the basic knowledge and skills they require, and to what extent are the higher intellectual skills, analysis, reflection, critical thinking, eloquent expression, an aspiration rather than a reality?

You will, argue that we have changed a great deal, and that students leave utterly transformed compared with when they entered? And you will be right. And yet I ask, have we done enough?

Second, in terms of research and scholarship, recent decades have seen enormous change in how and where knowledge is generated, applied, and disseminated. Universities and institutes of technology no longer have a monopoly on generating knowledge or educating people. A wide variety of enterprises, economic and social, can be seen as knowledge enterprises, discovering, applying, teaching. We need to ask ourselves: have we become aloof or removed from this new reality? The successful university of the future will embrace this change and see it as the most extraordinary opportunity. Our scholarly community will change and grow, far beyond the boundaries of our campus. We will be joined by new types of colleagues and new types of learner who do their research and their teaching and their learning in enterprises and in the community. The

sociologist Gerard Delanty describes this brave new world in the following terms:

“..the university is no longer the primary site of knowledge production...there is a proliferation of so many different kinds of knowledge...the university cannot re-establish the broken unity of knowledge, but it can open up avenues of communication between these different kinds of knowledge”

And goes on to sound the following warning

“the task of the university is to open up sites of communication in society rather than, as it is currently in danger of doing, becoming a self-referential bureaucratic organisation”

This will present all manner of challenges, balancing rigour and expediency, free enquiry and urgent solutions, and above all ensuring that a large and loose association of knowledge workers retains a sense of community and a capacity to learn from one another. But the rewards, in new knowledge, new applications, new learning and true innovation, will be enormous.

Third, we have the opportunity presented by technology, which has the power to address some of our fundamental problems in teaching, most significantly, the challenge of allowing a large number of students with very diverse abilities to learn at their won pace, and to learn collaboratively. And again, I ask the question, have we done enough to exploit this opportunity? And again I make the assertion

that some of us will, and they will be the successful universities of the future.

Fourth, and finally, there is the matter of public accountability. Let us ask this difficult question: how good an account of ourselves do we give? What modes and systems have we established to give an account of ourselves to the society we serve? What have we done to build public trust in our institutions and supplant a dangerously negative public discourse on the value of education? The truly courageous institution, proud of its work, valuing its autonomy, will move quickly to explain itself, account for its successes and its failures, and describe its constant quest for self-improvement, and the benefits that accrue as a result of its endeavours.

This, then, is what I believe. A university is a place of universal learning, where all types of research, scholarship, teaching and learning are welcomed and accommodated, where a diversity of students from widely different backgrounds and cultures, speaking many different languages, and wrestling with many different questions. This is bound together in a learning community, where each learns from the other, and it is the very diversity of that community that confers the power not only to see things as they really are, but to see how they might be. This place of universal learning serves many purposes: it discovers, it applies, it teaches, it promotes learning, it engages with the problems of the day, it is a generator and a repository of human culture. And through all these things in

combination it serves as an engine of innovation and economic growth and a central institution in the maintenance of a free, open, equal and democratic society.

I am not afraid to say there is more than this: a university is a place where learning is loved, and discovery and knowledge are appreciated as ends in themselves. It is about people and ideas and culture, because, all material benefits aside, at the end of the day, what is meaningful is the struggle to understand, to put some order and shape on the universe, to tend the wondrous tapestry of human culture, to better ourselves; it is an expression of the better angels of our nature, it makes us human. This is the spirit of the university, a flame that we forget to name, but which is the source of all our energy and vitality.

This, then, is the sort of university I wish to lead. One that sets itself the highest of goals, pursues them with conviction, asks itself the hardest of questions, seeks the best of answers, and has the courage to adapt and change for the better, no matter how difficult that may be. I have no doubt that NUI Maynooth is such an institution.

And we will not be alone. We can have no monopoly or right answers to the hard questions, many different approaches will be tried, and we have much to gain from working together and learning from each other.

In this context, I look forward to working with you: with our colleagues in St. Patrick's College Maynooth, with whom we share a

heritage, a campus and a future; with colleagues in Dublin City University and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland with whom we intend to have a formal structured collaborative partnership; with colleagues in Institutes of Technology in our wider hinterland, where the possibility of regional clustering holds real opportunities for our students and our region; with enterprise and community partners, where we have so much to offer each other; with colleagues in the Greater Dublin Region, with whom we have built relationships through the Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance; with colleagues in higher education nationally. Let me say this: NUI Maynooth is a special institution with particular strengths. We will, as an institution, mark out our own distinctive place, true to our ideals, values and capacities, in the national and international higher education landscape. And we look forward to working with you to the advantage of all our students, our economy and our society.

Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil libh mar lucht éisteachta, as a bheith i láthair anseo inniu agus as an éisteacht a thug sibh dom, mo bhuíochas le gach aon duine agaibh as an tacaíocht a thug sibh dom ag amanna éagsúla de mo shaol, agus, ar deireadh, mo bhuíochas roimh ré, as an tacaíocht, tá mé cinnte, a thabharfaidh sibh dom sna blianta atá le teacht.

Go raibh maith agaibh go léir.