*The current idea of a university – Is it fit for purpose in the 21st century?*

**The wide range of universities**

There is some disquiet as to whether the universities have positioned themselves well for the challenges ahead in the 21st century. But before embarking on this discussion it is as well to review how the universities have developed over time and where they stand at present.

The idea of a university generates many different images and one of the most picturesque was supplied by D Scott[[1]](#footnote-1) when he wrote,

*If the greatest treasures of a university are the minds of its scholars and teachers, past and present, then they are best demonstrated in the achievements they have made and the traditions they have nurtured. These latter would include intellectual honesty and imaginative enquiry; a willingness to experiment, to think creatively and a determination to question and to analyse; a concern to discover new solutions to problems but not to disguise the existence of problems that stubbornly persist despite all efforts to dispel them. But the greatness of a university is also to be measured in more tangible terms: its teaching and learning resources, its library, museums and scientific equipment; the architectural environment it develops for itself and the way it promotes social interaction; the links it establishes with other centres of learning and research, and the fruitful collaboration it initiates, collective or individual, with scientists and scholars.*

Clearly Scott was waxing lyrically and it is hoped that he did not intend the above to be in any way a definition of a university. He was in fact describing one of the prestigious ancient universities in the British Isles. For the 21stcentury this is a most romantic view of how universities should be perceived. Thinking of the modern university it is necessary to look at what it provides through a much more utilitarian lens.

One of the challenges in doing this is that universities have become complex multidimensional entities which effect a number of different aspects of our lives and which play an important role in society. As a result, it is not a simple matter to define the purpose of a university or for that matter to even comprehensively describe one. This is further complicated by the fact that, whereas in the past all universities were quite similar institutions, today there are a wide range of institutions which refer to themselves as universities. Thinking of the Newman University in the United Kingdom with about 3000 students and the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India with about 4 million students as similar institutions can only be confusing if not outright misleading. A question which could be asked is does the Newman and the Indira Gandhi National have anything in common. A superficial answer might be, not a lot, but at rock bottom one could say that both institutions are places where learning will be facilitated which will result in the awarding of a certificate. The idea that a university is an institution which award certificates or diplomas or degrees is not to be dismissed as trivial. A university certificate normally or at lease often[[2]](#footnote-2), in the form of a degree, is evidence that a certain level of competence has been achieved in a particular field of study.

Moving on from the dimension of size to the issue of scholarship and research there are at one end of the spectrum universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, where the best students (and perhaps faculty) from all over the world seek admission, to at the other end of the spectrum regional universities where the emphasis is on providing much more modest facilities for local students. The resources which the well-established universities in the United Kingdom have at their disposal are in some cases enormous[[3]](#footnote-3) but most universities have very limited financial means and reserves. By the way as, could have been expected, Oxford and Cambridge are at the top of the UK league table of university wealth and they are reckoned to have £5.5 billion and £4.8 billion respectively in their endowment funds. These two financial giants are followed by Edinburgh at about £400 million and Manchester at about £230 million. These numbers decline rapidly when the smaller and newer universities are considered.

**The purpose of a university**

Returning to what these different universities have in common it is useful to look at what might be regarded as the purpose of a university. The Centre for Industry Engagement which is a part of Pearson College London, a newly established private university, convened a panel to discuss the question *What is the purpose of a university?* From the report of this panel discussion it appears that a wide range of views were expressed with the suggestion that the purpose of a university is to be the guardian of reason and to provide philosophical openness preserving pure enquiry from dominant public opinions. Furthermore, it was suggested that the purpose of the University has changed to a focus on social mobility. It was suggested that the University allows more people to transform their lives, if necessary, at the expense of some academic rigour[[4]](#footnote-4). The report went on to say that the reasons for going to university included the opportunities to achieve higher-order skills; attaining an entrepreneurial mindset; enjoy more autonomy by comparison with working life; challenge prejudices; the opportunity to enjoy diving deeply into a subject that you’re passionate about and the opportunity to create lifelong friendships.

There are many interesting and controversial ideas here although it is not clear that they actually address the question which was put to the panel.

**The evolution of the university**

Before comprehensively addressing the purposes of a university in the 21st century it is important to note that what universities provide society has varied over time. In an important way the University is and has been a mirror of the intellectual needs and aspirations of a society and it is apparent that in the 800 years since universities became a Western European phenomenon our societal needs and aspirations have changed again and again.

Universities grew out of cathedral schools where the novitiates were being prepared for careers in the church. With the revival of Europe in the early years of the Renaissance it became clear that if the affairs of society were to develop and prosper more individuals had to be permitted to acquire some higher education and the universities created throughout Europe were one of the response to this need. From the earliest days the universities were autonomous whereby they set their own rules and regulations. There was no direction or management by the state and they all independently set their own standards. These privileges which the universities assumed became known as academic freedom[[5]](#footnote-5).

Prior to these developments higher education was only the prerogative of the most powerful and affluent members of society and largely provided by private tutors[[6]](#footnote-6). Of course, even with universities at this time they were intensively elitist with admission been highly restricted[[7]](#footnote-7). It took hundreds of years before universities opened up to more general elements of the public and, for example, it was only in the mid to later 19th century that women were allowed to attend lectures. Furthermore, there were other restrictions placed on those wishing to attend a university. The universities like many other aspects of society were generally highly intolerant of anyone professing religious beliefs other than those of the establishment[[8]](#footnote-8).

Up until this period universities focused on preparing individuals for the traditional professions[[9]](#footnote-9) and in so doing they restricted their scholarly enquiries to the examination and understanding of the great minds in their field. For example, in former times being fully acquainted with the thinking of Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas was seen in some circles as a clear indication of an enormous scholarly achievement[[10]](#footnote-10). At that time there was indeed some activity which we would recognise today as research such as that conducted by Isaac Newton at Cambridge University or Galileo Galilei in Italy but this was more the exception rather than the rule. It was only in the 19th century, and as a direct result of the needs of the continuing expansion of the industrial revolution and largely due to a desire not to be left behind by initiatives taken in Germany, that universities took on the challenge of developing capabilities which could be directed towards what we would call scientific enquiry. This was, of course, the age of heroic engineering with the likes of Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Cyrus West Field. However, this research culture in the universities took time to be established and even by the early 20th century research was not prevalent as it is today within many universities.

**A public service institution**

It is worth pointing out that the number of students attending University even in the 20th century prior to the end of the Second World War was tiny. A university education was out of the reach of the vast majority of the population and it was to remain so for some decades. However, a realisation was growing that there was a real social and economic need for increased higher education in society and a trend was started which was based on the notion that there should be equality of opportunity through education. But major developments had to wait until major changes in attitudes which brought in the Labour Government in 1945[[11]](#footnote-11) and this would eventually see the demand for university education extend into every corner of society. A university education was now no longer simply a matter of preparing for a career in one of the professions, which now included, science and engineering, but also a matter of becoming a rounded and educated individual[[12]](#footnote-12). At this time the central model of the university was largely that the university was a centre of scholarship and that students attended mostly for self-development as well as subsequent career opportunities.

During this period education was perceived as an important public service which would have far-reaching benefits, not only for its direct recipients, but for society as a whole. The general ethos now became that the better educated the society, the better it would be able to cope with the multifaceted challenges of the modern world[[13]](#footnote-13). In addition, university education was becoming to be seen as a natural continuation or extension of secondary school education. The elitist orientation of the University was substantially but not entirely eliminated[[14]](#footnote-14).

There are many twists and turns in the development of universities between the post-World War II period and today and the detail of these are beyond the scope of this book. However, it is important to point out that just like the establishment of universities in the early Renaissance period and the development of the nascent research culture in the mid-19th century, the way universities changed and are changing today simply mirror developments within the greater society. The 1960s and the 1970s saw a growth in the welfare state which and the universities enjoyed some of the consequences of this.

The polytechnic was a higher educational institution which benefits during this period. [In the 20th C. we saw the development of Regional colleges of Technology, of Commerce and of Art.

Under the control, in the main, of local authorities. Many of these colleges amalgamated and became known as ‘polytechnics’. Some of these awarded external degrees from the University of London but with the creation of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) polytechnics awarded degrees accredited by the CNAA before eventually gaining their own degree awarding powers] The Polytechnics had some very distinctive features such as the establishment of ‘sandwich degrees’, typicvally of four years duration rather than three in which a whole academic year was spent in an industrial context, making graduates immediately ‘useful’ to an employer on Day 1 of their employment. In addition, the polytechics catered very much for the needs of students who could only study part-time and included not only degree level courses but also professional updating courses. Polytechnics which were established in the 19th century to deliver mostly undergraduate technical education were expanded. A degree from a polytechnic generally did not carry as much status as a degree from a university, although it was strongly argued and accepted to some extent that their engineering degrees were superior to those offered by some universities. In any event in 1992 polytechnics were renamed as universities and are generally referred to as new universities or sometime post 1992-universities. There was some criticism of this move which was seen as a political manoeuvre and it was claimed that some good polytechnics had been converted into mediocre universities.

**The University Science Park**

Established in the 1950s in the USA the concept of the University Science Park took 20 years to cross the Atlantic. The first university to take up this idea was Cambridge University with a park was open for business in 1973. The science Park was conceived as an outreach by the University in order to connect with the greater society through the development of research findings into economic viable projects. It was a deliberate reorientation of academics attention from a narrow scholarly perspective to a much wider national and international reach. To a lesser extent it brought the research accomplishments of the University to the attention of the greater world. This concept was perceived by many to be most attractive and in the ensuing 20 years many universities developed science parks and today there are several dozens of such entities active in the UK.

**The massification of education**

The history of higher education would not be complete without considering the impact of a tremendously influential Robbins Report in 1962. At the time of the Robins report, approximately 4% of the age-cohort received a degree style education and it was recognised that there was a huge pool of undeveloped talent in the population as a whole. Like other industrial societies, universities were expanded rapidly in the 1960’s and 1970’s by expanding the intakes of already established universities, recategorising some former Colleges of Advanced Technology as universities (e.g. Salford, Bradford, Aston, Brunel) and establishing several brande new (‘plate glass’ \_universities such as Essex, Lancaster and York

However, a much greater growth in universities was yet to come. One of the most important development at the end of the 20th century was the notion that a much greater proportion of the population should avail themselves of tertiary education. This caused a significant increase in the demand for university places. At the same time, it was also believed that University degrees in general were not adequately vocational and consequently universities began to offer new degree programs in topics which had direct employment implications. It was at this time that the term the massification of education came into use and it was publicly declared that 50% of school leavers should attend some form of tertiary education. This coincided with the new idea that there now existed a knowledge society in which the old factors of production, land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship had become in some way subservient to knowledge[[15]](#footnote-15). It was argued that knowledge was what created success and therefore its acquisition was imperative and the universities were to play a large role in fostering the knowledge society.

The notion of mass education was well intentioned. But the question of how higher education for the 50% of school leavers was to be funded or if there was likely to be an adequate supply of appropriate job opportunities for this increased number of graduates does not seem to have been properly addressed. Some observers pointed out that some rapidly developing economies such as Malaysia educated up to 70% of their population and to participate in ‘knowledge based economies’ it was necessary to expand higher education to at least a 50% level. Cynics argued, however, that expanding universities helped to keep the late adolescents out of the army of the unemployed and thereby helped to massage the politically damaging effects of high ununemployment rates in a downward direction.

There is reason to believe that creating graduates without a suitable supply of post-graduate work opportunities can only lead to dissatisfaction. Recently a university was successfully sued for overstating the job opportunities which the possession of one of its degrees would give a graduate in the job market. A substantial award was made to the graduate who felt aggrieved by what she described as lies told by the University.

**The mid-career degree**

Another phenomenon associated with the last two decades of the 20th century was the growth of the midcareer degree. This degree was in the form of a so-called taught Masters. One of the original taught Masters was the Master of Business Administration (MBA) which was enormously successful at this time and in fact still remain so. However, many other departments within the University decided that they would provide a similar educational event which is primarily designed to consolidate experience and other relatively less formal education and provide a senior degree to more mature individuals. As senior executives were not often able to leave their jobs in order to pursue this type of education a number of universities developed short and/or part-time executive education programs which were in many cases spin-offs from these midcareer taught Masters degrees. For some universities this was and still is a most lucrative line of business.

**Student fees**

There is no doubt that universities have always been expensive. Except for Oxford and Cambridge Universities all the other universities up and down the country have always required state support from both local and central government. Student fees had never covered the costs of running a university and in some cases the fee income fell considerably short of the total bill. But whereas in the past these publicly funded costs have been seen as a necessary part of providing society with expertise, opportunities, culture etc, during the Thatcher years this thinking began to be questioned. University education began to be perceived as an economic good which had a cost and to which a price could be associated for those who wish to partake of it. This was a major shift as at this time the state had paid not only the University admission fee but also the expenses of those who wish to study and were admitted to a program at a University. This new attitude was a significant step in curtailing, what the government of the day saw as, the extravagance of the welfare state.

The idea that from a student’s point of view a university education should be wholly funded by the state was introduced in 1963 and was one of the consequences of the Robbins Report[[16]](#footnote-16), was now rejected and the notion of the cost burden falling on the recipient of the education was introduced. But it was believed that this could not be done in one fell swoop. In 1998 a £1,000 fee for undergraduates was introduced which was raised to £3,000 a year in 2004 and eventually to £9,000 a year in 2010[[17]](#footnote-17),[[18]](#footnote-18). and £9,250 in 20017 As it was realised that fees would effectively exclude many young people who did not have the resources to meet them a system of student income-contingent[[19]](#footnote-19) loans was set up to address this issue. Postgraduate fees were also increased.

The fee increases have been highly unpopular and the income contingent loans are seen as an extraordinary burden to place on young graduates at the beginning of their careers. Furthermore, these loans are not interest-free and at the date of writing the interest rate is 6% which is considered by many to be far too high. There is considerable political opposition to the fees and there is a reasonable prospect that they may be reduced or even eventually abolished.

The introduction of fees had many consequences one of which was a change of attitude toward university education where questions began to be asked if the personal investment in education was value for money. Furthermore the £9,000 level[[20]](#footnote-20) of fee created an environment in which educational entrepreneurs began to believe they could offer a comparative level of education for a lower price tag.

**The student as client**

Another consequence of the fees was that the universities began to talk about the fact that students should be considered to be clients. The intention of this was to introduce into the academic culture a notion of the necessity of providing a degree of service to the student. However, the nature of this service was not universally agreed and there were varying levels of success with this change of culture. Perhaps more importantly, there were those who believed that the word client was inappropriate to describe the nature of the relationship between a student and a university. The argument proposed was that a client pays for a service which is then consumed, often independently of the service provider. In the case of education, the service provided by the University is “consumed” (and it’s not clear that this is a suitable word to be used in these circumstances) through the development of a relationship between the institution and the student which leads to the improved intellectual capacity and perhaps physical skills of the student. It is not a simple matter to describe the processes by which the students’ mind and skills are developed through attending a university but it is clearly more than the simple consumption of facts and figures[[21]](#footnote-21) and the ability of the student to recall or regurgitate these in examinations. The use of the term client was another marker of the move towards the marketization of higher education. The central model of the university had now changed where the university was a provider of education, the student was the buyer of education and the outcome of the education was the ability of the student to acquire the appropriate level of employment.

Although the use of the concept of the market may be seen quite negatively when employed to deliver public sector services it does have the consequence of forcing organisation to look outward rather than entirely focus on their traditional inward concerns.

One continuing line of argument is whether students are to be regarded as ‘consumers’ or as ‘customers’ The fact that the terms are often used interchangeably reveals some severe conceptual confusions as to students who are indeed ‘consumers’ can actually be said to be the ‘customers’ of a university. Certainly, terms such as ‘customer’ is likely to add to an increasingly instrumental attitude on behalf of the student body, which may have led to an increasing tendency towards the practice of awarding evemn higher proportions of ‘excellent’ degrees (First or Upper Seconds, a practice known as grade inflation)

**Technology and education**

Technology has always played a role in education and the story of the recent development of universities would be incomplete without a discussion of how some universities have responded to technological innovation. Universities were early adopters of computers back in the 1960s but these were expensive mainframe machines used either for research or in later years for university administration. It was only at the beginning of the 21stcentury that universities appreciated that the Internet and the Web opened up new horizons through what we refer to today has e-learning. Initially e-learning was seen as an instrument which would support or facilitate distance learning and so the early systems were directed at non-traditional learners. However, it did not take long to realise that there were many aspects of e-learning which could be used alongside traditional teaching methods. This led to the establishment of an approach which is generally referred to as blended learning whereby there is a combination of traditional methods and e-learning technology. Of course, the Internet and the web can play a much wider role in other aspects of university life especially in the research endeavours of the institution. Students today often find it difficult to imagine just how labour-intensive academic research was as recently as 30 years ago when it came to such a simple matter as a literature review. Today the work involved in the gathering of appropriate literature has been massively reduced (favilitated?Although how many of the cited articles has been read in the original is actually a moot point). This is just one dimension of how this technology has facilitated academic endeavour.

Other universities employed the Internet and the web to support their activities in attracting overseas students both to their home campuses and also to new campuses which the University established abroad. Many universities now have overseas relationships with other universities or agents in countries around the world which has given them an opportunity to deliver their programs in areas and to students which could not have been imagined a few decades ago[[22]](#footnote-22). But just as it does for the greater society the Internet and the Web can be problematic for universities. Not everyone in society is responsible and universities have been troubled by students (mostly) using this technology for improper purposes including bullying and trolling[[23]](#footnote-23). The problem of plagiarism has also become endemic in the university sector

**Managerialism**

During this period of the late 20th century there was an increasing general acceptance of the belief that nearly all human behaviour and organisational performance was in some sense measurable. This was fostered by an increased interest in management science which was often attributed to the work of John Nash who won a Nobel prize for its contribution to game theory[[24]](#footnote-24). This led to a drive for efficiency not only in commerce and industry but also in the public services sector. The universities were certainly not exempt from this.

The rising number of students in higher education with commensurate increase in overall government expenditures fuelled a desire to ensure ‘cost-effectiveness’ and ‘value for money’ In particular, a variety of quality audits to ensure that higher education expenditure was judiciously spent led to increasing degrees of bureaucratisation in the ways in which courses were evaluated and delivered.

Thus at about the same time as fees were being established University leadership began to look at the implementation of management processes in order to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness with which education was being delivered. A new attitude of service delivery was focused across University activities. This had not been the case before and in general it was not well received by faculty members. The term managerialism, which was regarded as being highly derogatory, was coined by some to describe what many academics saw as the unwanted and unwarranted intrusion in their professional lives. Others who had a more political orientation referred to this as the introduction of neoliberalism into the university culture. This new approach emphasises a variety of performance measures including university ranking and league tables. University leaderships’ preference was now focused on employing market principles within the organisation including short-term contractual employment arrangements rather than the granting of any form of permanency, especially tenure. There did not appear to be any concern that the shift in employment practice could have any impact on the idea of collegiality. The underpinning notion that the student is actually a client means that in some cases staff remuneration packages were linked to student performance ratings. There is evidence that student performance ratings can be fickle but this did not seem to be taken into account where such schemes were employed. There was also the question of passing and failing. The new regime meant that there can be greater reluctance to see students fail than in the past. This can be at the expense of academic standards. In effect, managerialism is underpinned by the logic that the market is the primary arbitrator of value[[25]](#footnote-25) even in the realm of academe.

**Publish in highly rated journals**

Simultaneously the pressure to publish has been increased. Universities require academics to research and have their research findings published in accredited journals. Journals are now rated by a number of agencies[[26]](#footnote-26) and many universities encourage their faculty to be published in the journals which occupy the higher echelons of these rating tables. In some universities regulations were passed that only academics with publications in high rated journals should be allowed to supervise research students ought to examine research degrees. Having passed these rules some universities found it difficult to find appropriate staff and exemptions to the rules had to be granted. There is considerable competition to have work published in these journals and thus many universities have to be satisfied with their faculties’ rather slim representation in this end of the publishing spectrum.

**The Research Excellence Framework**

This emphasis on research was encouraged by the fact that the Higher Education Funding Council decided to introduce formal assessments of university research as an important element in the allocation of resources. Initially described as a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and subsequently further developed and renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[[27]](#footnote-27) this evaluation of the research output of universities has become a central aspect of how many universities sees its mission. One of the criteria used by the REF is to establish how many research papers the faculty of the University has published in high rated journals. To achieve a high score in the REF became a prime objective of most universities to the extent that academics with good research track records were being headhunted with very attractive financial packages in order to improve lower performing universities profiles. This has become so important that some academics are now describing universities as centres for the pursuit of research and have even in some cases come to believe that their teaching objective is secondary[[28]](#footnote-28). This change in attitude is not universal and where it exists it needs to be seen as a major shift in direction which has introduced some issues which are not yet resolved. There is a fundamental tension between the demands made on academic faculty with regard their teaching duties and their research output. There are not many individuals who can truly excel in both of these arenas especially at the level which is increasingly required of them.

**University performance or league tables**

One of the most especially difficult aspects of the new attitude towards universities can be seen in terms of university performance or league tables[[29]](#footnote-29). These league tables represent an attempt to display the relative merit of the university population either in the United Kingdom, or indeed around the world. There are a number of different agencies, including newspapers, producing these league tables. The criteria used and the weights given to different criteria vary. However, in general league positions are established on the basis of university perceived performance with regards to entry standards, student satisfaction, research quality, proportions of first-class and second class degrees awarded, and final occupation and salaries of graduates.

The top places in these league tables are inevitably occupied by the older and wealthiest universities. Their prestige ensures that they attract the best students and faculty and are supported in all sorts of ways by the society. There are now many of these league tables and some universities will find themselves being rated differently from one league table to another. They may be of some value to individuals seeking a place to study who have no appreciation of the academic environment within their country or around the planet.

Another issue which came to public attention in recent years was the escalation in Vice-Chancellor’s salarie s – perhaps facilitated by the large fee increases of up to £9,250 for the typical student Traditionally Vice-Chancellors were paid substantially more than professors. However, for a long time the premium would have been in the range of 50 to 100% more. Now some Vice-Chancellors are receiving salaries of over £500,000 with a significant number of individuals in the range of £250,000 to £500,000. Furthermore, other high office holders are also drawing high salaries. These level of salaries are regarded by many to be more appropriate for the boards of directors of international corporations than for university staff. Some Vice-Chancellors have accepted reductions in their pay packages but even those who have done this are still being awarded what is regarded by many as, extremely generously. There is an issue of governance here which is yet to be resolved in most universities.

It is important to note that the above description has focused on some of the major developments in the University environment in the United Kingdom and it is not true to suggest that other countries experienced exactly the same pressures and developments. However, by and large universities throughout the world have in recent years experienced increasing pressure with regards to the necessity to have research work published in high visibility journals and at the same time to cope with larger and frequently more demanding students. There has also been in many countries the need for universities to take on board the notions of efficiency and effectiveness and thereby introduce some if not all of the measures described above under the heading of managerialism.

**The idea of the University has changed**

Thus it is not difficult to see that now at the end of the second decade of the 21st century universities have become quite different institutions to what they were before. Put another way the idea of the University has changed. This had to have been expected especially if one accepts the claim that how universities operate as a reflection of the values of the society in which they function. Now the central question is whether or not the changes which the University of experienced support or hinder the universities’ purposes to serve society.

It can be said that traditionally a university has had four major objectives and these can be understood as streams of benefit delivery for the individual and society and these are: -

1. universities have been centres of specialised learning and personal development;
2. universities have provided certification for learning achievements;
3. universities have been sources of knowledge development i.e. research;
4. universities could also provide a focus for cultural expression. This can involve both the culture of the location of the University as well as having a global reach through the extensive academic network between universities all over the world.

All four of these objectives have to be reconsidered in terms of the shift in the way universities have now developed and these can be described as follows.

1. universities mostly now provide access to knowledge with a focus on its application in pursuit of career objectives;
2. universities still have provided certification but there is increasingly the notion of caveat emptor;
3. universities continue to be an important sources of knowledge development i.e. research but what is the focus of academic research and what about their important rivals;
4. universities are still important foci for cultural expression but they face increasing completion in this respect.

It is necessary to look at each of these separately to see how universities in the current environment can achieve each of these objectives.

**Learning and personal development**

Massification and managerialism have certainly impacted this aspect of the university experience. With regards to being centres of learning and personal development today universities are being called upon to produce graduates that are in some sense “work ready”. What constitutes “work ready” is not easy to define. Some universities see this as encouraging students to find internships or other similar types of work experience and as each University does it separately there is obviously a wide range of relative success in this respect. But the main thrust is largely to provide an opportunity for learning and in the smaller universities it might well be that students obtain a higher level of personal attention and closer monitoring from tutors. With regard to personal development this can be a different matter. At the university level this is largely about developing confidence and this comes from the general environment which the University creates and also from the way that society perceives students and their endeavours to develop themselves. There is still to a large extent a positive attitude towards university students which fosters the development of confidence. Confidence is also built up by working in groups and universities generally ensure that adequate experience is delivered in this respect.

Many would argue that learning occurs much more effectively in groups and these groups need to be small. This can be difficult to manage the large numbers of students are concerned and thus students at smaller universities may well have advantages. Technology can play an important role in this respect and universities which have larger resources and better industry connections have an advantage in this respect. Personal development also occurs outside the formal educational events and thus universities who have better cultural and sporting facilities may outperform well in this respect universities who do not.

Learning and personal development needs to be considered in terms of the question of the type of student which a University attracts. The prestigious universities will generally attract students with higher academic capability and therefore they will through their interaction and the classroom and in groups provide a higher level of discourse which will facilitate deeper levels of learning. An interesting issue in respect to attracting students is the duration of degrees. It has been argued that because of the small number of weeks in a university calendar (many universities work to a 26-week academic year) and because of the fact that many students do not have more than a few hours contact with faculty per day, it would be possible to shorten the period required to take a degree. Proposals have been put forward to deliver the same amount of education to students over a two-year period which currently requires three years.

The suggestion of reducing the period of the degree has not been popular with academics who argue that it takes time for higher education to be absorbed (i.e. deep learning to take place) and that although lectures and tutorials could be redesigned to be delivered over the shorter two-year period this would not lead to satisfactory educational outcomes for the students. Of course, if the two-year policy were to be introduced it would clearly be a cost saving device for the universities and it would release the students from the third year of study and this could be seen as providing them with greater opportunity to find appropriate gainful employment in what would otherwise be the third year of study.

An argument which is now being made even by some academics is that the direct learning function of the University has been reduced by the availability of the extraordinary range of educational material available through the Internet and the web. There are today multiple sources of material much of which is available free of charge on many subjects taught at university. In addition, there are numerous suppliers of paid-for courses available. Some universities have been prepared to allow some of their degree programs to be videoed and made available through Massive Open Online Courses referred to as MOOCs[[30]](#footnote-30). There is no doubt that there are more resources available to facilitate learning through the Internet and the web than there ever been before. Kevin Carey in his book the *End of College* argues that MOOCs and other Internet and web-based learning facilities constitute what he calls the *University of Everywhere* which he sees as the beginning of the end of the current configuration of the state universities in the United States of America. This idea of the University of Everywhere is very attractive and it should be especially welcome to communities who reside distant from traditional educational establishments and also those who will be able to get access to university level education without having to face the generally high fees required for the admission to these institutions. But Carey overestimates the attractiveness of studying alone using digital facilities and he underestimates just how important personal contact and encouragement is to the learning processes for most individuals[[31]](#footnote-31). He is also dismissive of several other important elements in the learning opportunity typically offered by universities which relates to the personal relationships which students develop and from which they learn as well as build up their confidence level.

Incidentally much of the material available on the Internet and Web is not aimed at degree course level. It often does not have appropriate structure to be able to grasp a specialised course at an appropriate level. There are a few courses that can provide the competent tutoring which can be supplied by a University and finally Internet and web based courses seldom afford the opportunity to work in groups in the same way that can be achieved by attendance at a university[[32]](#footnote-32). However, it is worth noting that these type of programs are being continually improved and that perhaps within a relatively short timeframe they will have been further developed so that they may be truly competitive with the type of specialised education available for university attendance.

**Certification of learning**

Technology has offered a considerable challenge to the integrity of the University degree. On the issue of the certification of learning the universities generally have a clear view with regards to their duty of care to ensure that students are competently examined before degrees are awarded. This has typically been performed well and universities are conscious of the need to ensure that this level of performance continues. But there have been and there still are challenges. The Internet and the web affords the students who would cheat great opportunities to indulge in plagiarism. Fortunately, the information and communications technology industry has provided tools which are relatively effective at detecting this. Nonetheless when plagiarism has been encountered it has created considerable stress within certain universities who often feel “hurt” that the students would engage in such activities. But universities are generally not enthusiastic about taking disciplinary action and plagiarists are sometimes only asked to repeat the work they have improperly submitted.

A similar challenge to academic integrity arises through the activity referred to as ghost-writing whereby a student submits a piece of work in his or her name which is actually being produced by someone else. Universities have always had to cope with some degree of ghost-writing. There have always been parents or relations or good friends who have assisted students, sometimes to the extent of actually writing the work for them. Fraternity clubs in certain universities have traditionally contained repositories of essays and assignments which were written by former students and which current students could have access to and if they so wished copied and resubmitted as their own work. Today the issue is that this type of activity has become extremely easy due to the availability of computer technology in general and the Internet and the web in particular. Most universities are struggling with this phenomenon.

Today there are scores of agencies which were write essays, assignments or dissertations on just about any subject for a fee[[33]](#footnote-33). These services are so well organised that they promise to deliver completed work to the particular standard demanded by the cheater and at the time required for an appropriate fee. Thus a history essay which will be awarded a second class pass and which is required in seven days’ time might for example cost £100. A first class history essay required in a couple of days might cost £1000. It is not necessarily easy for the University to detect this type of cheating which can really only be achieved by the faculty having a detailed knowledge of the capability of the cheater. Furthermore, universities have generally been surprised by these activities and their policies with which they have treated such incidents have not always been consistent. This type of cheating needs to be responded to with a substantial penalty.

It is essential that ghost-writing be defeated by the universities as it directly undermines the integrity of the degrees awarded and puts in jeopardy institutions function of the certification of knowledge achievement.

Of course there have always been a range of competence developed by graduates and those who have managed to progress through university on the basis of plagiarism and ghost writing should be easily identifiable.

**Research or knowledge development**

The intense demand for academics to publish quality peer-reviewed journals has impacted the quality of the research as well as resulted in challenges to issue a student care.

Universities as a source of knowledge development or research holds a very special place in society. There are a number of quite different streams of research which take place within the University and these may be considered under three major categories.

The first group of research activities related to research conducted by students, normally postgraduates[[34]](#footnote-34) in pursuit of either a master’s or doctoral degree. Here the research is integral to the degree itself and the degrees awarded on the basis of the findings of the degree.

The second type of research consists of projects, normally large projects which the University has accepted either from government or industry which will not have as its primary focus the awarding of degrees but which, can during its operation result in degrees being awarded to various individuals who have chosen to work on the project.

The third type of research is that which is undertaken by academics for the purposes of publication inappropriate journals. This is sometimes conducted on a personal basis while on other occasions academics work collaboratively and sometimes include students. From an academic career point of view this type of research is often the most important.

There is an argument that such reliance upon publication metrics can fundamentally subvert the work of a university. It could be that a scholarly piece of work in a journal devoted to professional practice (e.g. in social work or nursing) although lowly rated in journal prestige terms has much more impact upon societal good than an article which is highly rated but read by comparatively few scholars. Even the benchmark of entry to the academic profession, the PhD, has been described as the ‘transference of bones from one graveyard to another!’

In the case of the Masters degree the degree is awarded on the basis of the competent manner in which the research is being pursued and reported. There is normally no requirement for any degree of originality and as such this level of degree is not often included in the research achievements of the University. However, Masters degrees offer preparatory experiences for those who wish to go further to the doctoral level.

Doctoral degrees require something of value to be added to the body of knowledge which was not there before. The result has to be an original contribution to the field.

Masters degrees traditionally followed the same route except that their findings were not required to be a significant as those which were required for a doctoral degree. However, over the past 50 years a phenomenon called a taught Masters has become popular whereby the dissertation required after a series of taught courses is a significantly reduced affair. Nonetheless, even with this degree some significant research skills are required to be learnt by the students. The importance of research has become significant in the University environment and now many undergraduate programs involve research methodology courses and research projects requiring minor dissertations to be delivered. Research has become an integral part of the mind-set of the 21st-century academic and student.

The issue of the large project research is quite different. Here the University normally accepts this work on a contractual basis for substantial fees and where if possible opportunities to conduct academic research arise leading to Masters or doctoral degrees.

It is certainly correct to say that the culture of research has blossomed in many universities who are now ready and willing and able to undertake a wide range of this type of activity.

**Society’s cultural values**

The fourth objective of University is related to how it is sometimes regarded as the custodian and perhaps the harbinger of society’s cultural values. In the past universities attempted to be centres of learning across a wide range of topics. It was often said that to be a university one had to be able to show expertise across topics so diverse as engineering and music or English and physical sciences. In such an environment it is easy to see that different views and opinions regarding the nature of our society and what it has to offer were available. An appreciation of the complexity of the world we live in and how it impinges on our lives is perhaps one of the markers of a civilised society with a vibrant culture. Universities often held a variety of cultural events including music, theatre and visual art exhibitions.

Although some of this activity still continues there are many more opportunities in society for such cultural events and it is not clear that University has retained its place in society in this respect. It is probable that the University needs to reach out into the community to a much greater extent than it has done in the past.

**The answer to the question**

From the above it is hoped that it is relatively clear that there is no simple answer to the complex question, *Is it (the University) fit for purpose in the 21st century?* The University faces many different challenges all of which reflects the fact that 21stcentury society is enormously different to what it has been in the past. Changes will have to be made as to how the University operates.

In general, we have embraced a much more market-driven attitude which extends towards a whole range of activities some of which were previously regarded as public services. Fifty years ago it was unthinkable that our public utilities such as electricity, water and gas would be delivered by the private sector. The idea of our prisons being managed by private companies would have been regarded as risible. All of this has radically changed and it is difficult today to imagine sectors of our society which could not be privatised. On the University front there is no reason why the small number of private universities might not grow and become a dominant feature of the higher education system. If the university sector is opened to serious competition then it is quite possible, at least initially, that tuition fees might fall and this could make the University education more accessible. However, the policy of increasing fees to their present level has not encouraged any significant degree of competition so that the whole of the higher education system could be regarded as a vast cartel which has served to maximise student fee income (and commensurate salaries of university chiefs)

Over the last 20 year period the notion of work-ready has to some extent taken hold and one can see the possibility of universities taking on much more vocationally orientated work and possibly offering the suggested shorter two-year degree has a way of curtailing the costs of this most important sector. It is likely that universities will attempt to get much closer to organisations which are in a position to offer employment to the graduates. This could produce a stream of benefits on both sides.

But both the privatisation of the sector and its closeness to business but not necessarily guarantee that standards will be sustained. More attention will need to be offered to this consideration and this will have knock-on effects on the operation of the University. What is today referred to as managerialism and which effects important elements of academic life is quite likely to become the dominant ethos of the University sector.

There is no doubt that there will be greater efforts to introduce more technology into the learning process. It is not yet clear how successful artificial intelligence will be in its quest to eventually mimic and then exceed the capability of the human mind. But even at its current, relatively modest, capability it is possible to much further integrate it into the learning and self-development arena.

It is highly unlikely that the so-called University of Everywhere will in any way be able to replace or even seriously compete with what the universities have to offer. However, e-Learning will continue to support traditional approaches. It will continue to offer access to some learning experiences to individuals who cannot reach a university either due to their location or to other considerations such as finance.

There is no doubt that education will continue to be a most important and highly valued aspect of our society and that we will continue to seek new ways of improving its delivery and its effective employment in our institutions. There is no reason to believe that the University will not continue to be a highly vibrant and often controversial aspect of our society.

1. Scott D, (ed.) 1992, Treasures of the Mind, p xi, Sotherby’s London [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, there are a number of bogus or phoney institutions which issue worthless degree certificates. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. But the resources of the UK universities are not as big as the Ivey League universities in the USA. In 2018 Harvard is said to have US$ 39 and Yale US$29. See: <https://www.ivycoach.com/the-ivy-coach-blog/ivy-league/2018-ivy-league-endowments/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See: <https://www.pearson.com/uk/educators/higher-education-educators/course-development-blog/2018/04/what-is-the-purpose-of-a-university-.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Academic freedom soon developed into an attitude which stated that faculty members could decide what should be taught, when it how be taught and how it should be taught. This type of freedom has been sustainably reduced in recent years. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The only regular and systematic education which was being offered during this period was through the Roman Catholic Church as this was some 300 years before the Reformation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Conditions in these mediaeval universities were said to be extremely harsh. Students tended to be very young often in their early teens and modus operandi was more like a monastery than an institution of higher learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. University College London established in the early part of the 19th century was the first university in the United Kingdom to admit women, Jews, Catholics and other nonconformist believers. As a result, it became known as the atheist university [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The traditional professions include the law, medicine, teaching (with emphasis on grammar, rhetoric and dialectics), and the church. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jonathan Swift did not entirely share the view that universities were valuable centres of learning which he displayed with some sarcasm in Gulliver’s Travels Part 3, Chapter 5, first published in 1726. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The same change in general social attitude which cause the creation of the National Health Service (NHS) and moved the United Kingdom towards becoming a welfare state. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the USA hundreds of new universities were built at this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This view was epitomised by Harold Wilson’s famous speech in which he referred to “the white heat of technology”. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2013/sep/19/harold-wilson-white-heat-technology-speech> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The establishment of some additional universities and the conversion of some Colleges of Advanced Technology help reduce the elitist image of the university. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Much of what was said about the knowledge society was at best naïve and at worst misleading and did not amount to any real changes in how society functioned. However, at this time emphasis was placed on the need for lifelong learning and how knowledge sharing was critical to satisfactory development at both a personal and organisational level. It was true that many of the new jobs created in this period require different kinds of skills to what was required before but the universities were not especially good at helping their students in this respect and some of those who obtained the more vocationally orientated degrees were disappointed by the level of job opportunities which accompanied these qualifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Professor Lord Robbins chaired a committee appointed by the Prime Minister to investigate the state of UK Higher Education which was presented to parliament in 1963. It resulted in major changes as to how higher education was perceived and delivered in the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The fees paid by overseas students was also substantially increased which resulted in some universities seeing these students as “cash cows”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. These figures which were prescribed by the government were to be the maximum which a University could charge. Nearly all universities immediately charge the top figure which is said to reflect the fact that universities did not want to take any course of action which would suggest that they were in any way inferior to any other university. This resulted in approximately the same level of fees being charged by Oxford and Cambridge as was being charged by much less distinguished new universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. An income-contingent loan means that repayment is only required when a certain income level has been surpassed. There was an expectation that most graduates would easily reach this level of income. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The £9000 fee level was introduced two years after the 2008 financial crisis and was put through Parliament after considerable dissension from the opposition. It has sometimes been argued that this exceptional hike in fee level was the cause of the subsequent disastrous performance of the Liberal Democratic Party in the United Kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The facts and figures model of education is well described by Charles Dickens in the opening lines of hard times. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This internationalisation of universities was also facilitated by the deregulation of the airline industry which brought on an era of relatively low airfares thus giving both students and faculty the opportunity of being able to travel at modest cost. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-7077545/Victim-Warwick-Uni-Facebook-rape-chat-scandal-claims-investigator-quizzed-sexual-history.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/the-triumph-and-failure-of-john-nashs-game-theory> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. It is difficult to see the difference between neoliberal policies and simple capitalist policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See: <https://charteredabs.org/academic-journal-guide-2018/> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This is a highly contentious issue and is not often debated in public. But the behaviour of universities is such that it can be deduced that from senior management point of view research has become of critical importance. Of course this is linked to the fact that government funding favours universities with high research credentials. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. It has been suggested that there is evidence that MOOCs are much more frequently watched by faculty than by students. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. e-Learning is such an advancement on correspondence learning that it is sometimes forgotten that the best learning has always occurred through direct personal contact. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. It is difficult to see how the University of Everywhere could be accredited or have any credibility in the corporate or governmental world. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Some of these ghost-writing agencies offer to write both masters and doctoral dissertations in surprisingly short periods of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. It is now increasingly popular to include a short research dissertation in undergraduate degrees. This is a very important pedagogical device but it does not normally lead to research findings which will be considered of value by the institution. Undergraduate research is performed in order that the student learns how to go about research. All of that has radically changed and we are now [↑](#footnote-ref-34)