

THE THING WE LIVE IN

The University

“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 the seat of literature and science....

But practically speaking, it cannot fulfil its object duly...without the Church’s assistance: or to us the theological term, the Church is necessary for its *integrity*. Not that its main characters are changed by this incorporation: it still has the office of intellectual education; but the Church steadies it in the performance of that office.”

J H Newman, *The Scope and Nature of University Education*

What are the values which should inspire and govern the life of our University? It seeks to be a place of *learning*, but does it still cherish Newman’s classical idea of *universal knowledge*? We have seen the establishment of “universities of technology”, whose title formally limits the terms of their learning; and the departments within our University have become so secluded from each other that the various disciplines in a faculty are only related insofar as some students may be studying two of them within the same course: cross-fertilization across faculty divides is much rarer even at that level, and on a general front (such that the University’s school of history is affected by developments within the faculty of science) almost unheard-of. Is our University more than a large collection of small schools, on the same campus?

On a social level, of course, it exists differently, and so within a group like Cathsoc many people will meet students from other disciplines. Within a Hall of Residence the same thing happens. But is the experience of learning a University one - is there any longer a University education?

To the unqualified man on the Clapham omnibus *university* just connotes “allegedly very clever”. “Allegedly” here means “probably not”, because he may well have met someone who shows small sign of education, who is yet graced with the laurels of some modern University. What is an *educated* person like? Does it imply something more than, say, great competence with a speciality like financial matters, or deep awareness of the behaviour of certain bodily chemicals, or electric currents? Is a University-educated technologist different from a good practitioner of technology?

What does the Government expect of the University? There is an acknowledged freedom in the ideal of the University which has traditionally wrong-footed the attempts of Governments to hijack or recruit the affections of a University as such. The Universities are chartered as free, sovereign institutions whose academic freedom is a high component of the liberties of a free country; the suspension of this liberty is one of the characteristic deeds of tyrannies. As Machiavelli would say, “However....” the holding of the purse-strings by ministries of education cause all Universities to listen carefully when Governments spell out the values they would like to see governing the world of higher education. Characteristically, are such messages idealistic, or utilitarian and pragmatic? Do you think the influence of the Government is a positive one on the University’s thinking? Is its independence precious to *you*?

“This is a non-profit-making institution”;

but if every single member is chasing economies and worrying about expenditure, can we be said to benefit from this principle?

What does a student expect of the University? Existentially this may be answered in lots of ways - social (friendship), topographical (campus, hall, buildings), geographical (close to but not in Birmingham) etc - and much of it may coincide with the ideals of the Government or of the economic system of the country (job prospects, for instance, or academic advantage). What sort of education do you consider a student should be able to ask for: what rôle should private study, private tutoring, or concern for you as an individual have, as against your status as a paying customer, a component in the financial structures which underpin

“a research-led institution of excellence”?

Do you think anyone is looking after your personal education, or able to comment on your progress as an individual? Does anyone suggest you should change your study-diet, supplement your reading, develop some specific gift? What about your personal aims, happiness, future as a person? Or are such questions extraneous to the concept of “education”?

What pressures should bear on members of staff? “Research-led” implies that everyone who teaches also researches regularly; staff who lean away from research towards the helping of undergraduates have to answer to their heads of department, who have to consider their departmental status, which is governed by research-ratings. Downward pressure to excel in the latter is exerted by the management-group, who have the standing of the whole institution to consider:

“No-one wants to work in a second-rate institution”.

Does academic freedom mean very much if *everyone* in the University is pedalling away at these external standards and demands, often at the cost of their own aims and the stated purpose of the University itself?

Should a University have a heart? The University lays on services for sick students (Cripps), bewildered students (counsellors) departing students (careers office) and interested students (union & societies). It welcomes the services of Chaplaincy as a gift from the Churches, and responds with a measure of financial favour. The Estate Office, Security, Central Catering, halls of residence, accommodation office, and various international services can claim to represent a heavy investment in student welfare. Yet people often perceive the institution as lacking in heart, as stingy with finance, as unsympathetic to the needs of strange-shaped people who do not meet its categories. Does this perception hold any water? What, if anything, should the University do to deepen its sensitivity to people? Is the amorphous “pressure” which fills the academic/organisational life of the University visited on students negatively?

(Chaplaincies *represent a rare reality in the body of the University. Unpaid by the institution, yet deeply involved with the personal needs of its members, they can hold up a mirror to the state of the University, and speak for values which they think are under threat.*)