

The missing universities: Absent critics and consciences of society?

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Abstract

In too many instances, universities have become ineffective in their role as ‘critic and conscience of society’. Support for this contention is provided in this paper by addressing the questions: What is the evidence that universities are failing to act as critic and conscience of society? In what ways should universities continue to be the critic and conscience of society? Exemplars and examples of what has been, what is, and what might be are provided.

It is posited that as a good critic a university should recognise its role, remain sceptical, stretch the boundaries of knowledge imaginatively, defend academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and pronounce judgement as appropriate. As a conscience, the university should take into account the moral quality of the actions and motives of both itself and society, distinguish among dismissiveness, tolerance and respect, and differentiate among bare fact, knowledge and wisdom. The conscience, it is suggested, tempers the critic. Consideration is given to how much force, and what type, should be applied to the urging of views. Choices are made among expressions of right and wrong, dimensions of meaning, and matrices of values. Sometimes, wisely, the choice is to be less than free with one’s speech.

Also, it is argued that it is essential to have an underpinning philosophy. Without a philosophy, there can be no conscience. Without a conscience, criticality is of little worth.

Introduction: Extremities of an Important Topic

Dig a hole through the centre of the Earth from Wellington, New Zealand, and you will come out in Salamanca, Spain. Essentially, you will have transported yourself from the New World to the Old. You will have left a country that saw European settlement as late as the nineteenth century and entered one that had a thriving university by the middle of the thirteenth century (even before the main Maori migration to New Zealand from the eastern Pacific).

Before you commenced your burrowing you might have noticed that there is a cannon on one of the ‘lookout’ vantage points of Mount Victoria, Wellington, and, if so, you would have been bemused to find that it pointed across the harbour at the city’s university. The threat of fire has never been real. The cannon is a symbol of colonial times. However, metaphorically, it triggers thoughts of real and virtual threats to the university – and society – of today and tomorrow. It can remind one, also, of the very real threat to Lloyd Geering, a professor of theology, and his beliefs, when he was tried for heresy as recently as the 1960s. How, one might wonder, could that have happened in such modern times in New Zealand?

Complete the dig to Spain, emerge at Salamanca, find the almost 800-year-old university within walking distance of the main plaza of the ancient city, do some research on it, and you will find it has a history of triumph and tribulation, rise and fall, eminence and mediocrity, leadership and loss. The University of Salamanca was “once the world’s pre-eminent centre of learning” (Michener, 1971, p.409); ‘today’, at best, it has become “the school for lesser intellectuals of good family” (ibid., p.416).

Why the huge drop in prestige? Some of the answers can be found in the fate of another professor of theology, Fray Luis de León, revered as a humanist, who in the latter half of the eighteenth century was thrown in jail for five years, without trial, for being half Jewish, for translating *King Solomon’s Song of Songs* into the vernacular, and for querying the accuracy of the Latin version of the Bible in relation to the Hebrew version (ibid., pp.458-459). Should we just shake our heads and pass this off as yet another inhumanity of the Spanish Inquisition? Hardly. Answers must be sought in relation to such injustice. What should have been done? What should be done in similar circumstances?

Specific to this paper, we will consider how well the universities have stood up for the Fray Luis de Leóns and Lloyd Geerings of the world. How has the role as ‘critic and conscience’ been played for such people in their times of crisis? How has it related to human well-being and wisdom? In the conclusion we will revisit and reflect on the experiences of our two scholars – one of Wellington, the other of Salamanca. In the meantime – more generally but with relevance to the issues and fates of individuals and beliefs, and to underpinning philosophies and ideologies – we will explore the historical and current presence or absence of universities as ‘critic and conscience’.

What Is the ‘Idea’ of a University?

Distinct from the ivy-covered walls, lecture halls, libraries and recreational facilities of universities around the world, an essential component is something that we can’t pierce with a cannon ball. It is ‘imagination’. As put by the English-American educationist and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1950, p.139): “The justification of a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning.”

As indicated by Whitehead, a blend of left- and right-brain activity in an inter-generational context is crucial. “Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience” (ibid., p.140). As visualised by scholars millennia ago and recalled by Whitehead, learning is “a torch passing from hand to hand down the generations” (ibid., p.145).

The focus is community, not individual. It is on ‘a band of scholars, or ‘a community of scholars’, “stimulating each other, and freely determining their various activities” (ibid., p.149). Academic freedom is integral. So is institutional autonomy. Universities should be and have been “the home of those ideals which lead men to confront the confusion of their present times” (ibid., p.142).

The ‘idea’ has changed over time. The earliest universities – Bologna, Paris, and Oxford dating back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries – were to a great extent professional schools, preparing their students for work in subjects such as medicine, law, and theology. As indicated by Gardner (2007, p.25), with his panoramic scan from east to west, behaviour relating to other skills and knowledge was important:

Several hundred years ago, in both its Chinese and its European guises, an educated élite was expected to master a set of performances. Upon completion of his education, the Confucian scholar could distinguish himself in calligraphy, archery, music, poetry, horsemanship, participation in rituals, and mastery of important texts. His counterpart in Europe was able to exhibit the performances of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) as well as the quadrivium (music, geometry, astronomy, and arithmetic). Instead of being asked to understand and apply, the apt student would simply repeat – indeed, often memorise verbatim – the wisdom of the intellectual ancestors: Confucius or Mencius in the East; Aristotle or Aquinas in the West.

Evolution of the earliest universities saw the trivium and quadrivium combined with professional studies. As far as educational access was concerned, the benefits were for the privileged few.

Utilitarianism – with its peculiarly selfish and economic pursuit of Bentham’s ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’ – was the philosophical basis. This was of concern to John Henry Cardinal Newman in Britain in the nineteenth century. In a series of lectures published as *The Idea of a University*, he preferred liberalism – with its encouragement of free exercise of speech, religion, and association and its resistance to political absolutism – as a philosophical basis. According to Newman (1852, cited in Malcolm & Tarling, 2007, p.27), a ‘liberal education’ is where “a habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom ... a philosophical habit ... this is the main purpose of a university in its treatment of its students”.

The ‘idea’ according to Newman comprises a commitment to universal learning. As expressed in his time, it enabled ‘a man’ to discharge his duties to society. It gave such a person (a man or woman of today) “a

clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them” (ibid., p.28).

There was an emphasis on factual knowledge. “All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind, forms one large system of complex fact, and this of course resolves itself into an infinite number of particular facts, which, as being portions of the whole, have countless relations of every kind, one towards another” (ibid., p.25).

Whitehead – as noted above – added imagination. Also, wittingly or otherwise, he encouraged constructivism (together with liberalism) as a philosophical basis – with its purport that “knowledge is not something that bombards our consciousness and is absorbed; rather, it is something that we actively construct to make the world meaningful” (Weigel, 2002, pp.3-4). “A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes” (Whitehead, 1950, p.139).

It has been argued that there is social and political responsibility and accountability. “Academic freedom is as much a duty as a right” (Thorens, 2006, p.97). A university “is an institution created or allowed by society and the State to participate in the development of knowledge and its dissemination through research and higher education for the welfare of mankind” (ibid., p.89). And, with an emphasis on lack of bias or prejudice: “The university is the instrument that society and the State use to promote the development of knowledge in a general and ‘disinterested’ way” (ibid., p.90).

A mission is to seek ‘truth’. “This could also be expressed as the development of knowledge in order to avoid stereotypes and be better understood” (ibid., p.89). Also, the university has a mission of “active guardian of high level culture” (ibid., p.96). Other missions are: “higher education, research, mainly but not exclusively pure or applied, and other services rendered to society as a whole, whether directly or indirectly” (ibid., p.90).

As stated by Malcolm and Tarling (2007, p.155), universities are distinctive in five characteristics: namely, “in their concern with degree-level programmes related to the current knowledge in a field and enabling the graduating student ‘to achieve a significant measure of intellectual independence with respect to the use and application of the knowledge gained and the capacity of ongoing learning’”; “their commitment to teaching and research, ‘an integrated function’”; “their international character”; “their ‘repository role’”; and “their role as ‘critic and conscience of society’”.

Legislative definitions of universities confirm the role of ‘critic and conscience of society’ – for example, in the New Zealand Education Act 1989, s.162(4)(a).

What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Critic and Conscience of Society’?

The coupling of ‘critic’ with ‘conscience’ is significant. A real cannon ball fired at a university does damage that can be repaired. A verbal barrage of ‘cannon balls’ fired continually and indiscriminately at society could be permanently divisive and destructive. As argued by Malcolm & Tarling (2007, p.227):

The inclusion of the word ‘conscience’ is important. Without it the role of critic of society may easily be viewed as mainly negative, standing apart from its society and observing and censuring its faults and shortcomings. But the inclusion of the word ‘conscience’ points to a positive dimension of the role and one that operates from within society in a stance of shared involvement and responsibility. To be a conscience of society is to provide opportunity for self-reflection within it, to support consideration of its fundamental objectives and values and to encourage continuing consideration of the outcomes of those objectives and values for human well-being.

As a critic, alone, it can be too easy to base arguments on life’s dichotomies – love or hate, reverence or ridicule, right or wrong, in or out, present or absent, cannon fodder or not. As a conscience we reflect on the interplay of many voices. Like Freud’s ‘superego’, the input is from parents, extended family, ancestors via relayed tales, peers, church leaders, kindergarten teachers, mentors, and a host of others.

The conscience tempers the critic in us. This moderating influence is crucial to us individually and socially. It provides indications of strength and weakness of a multiplicity of relationships between and among members of communities of scholars and society at large. Dynamically, from context to context, it shifts single thoughts along continua of concepts. It evolves matrices of possibilities in place of simplistic solutions. It pushes boundaries and explores new territories. On important topics that should be shared with society, it can transform dismissal as tolerance, and tolerance as respect. Through its influence, wisdom and well-being can transcend fact and knowledge.

In New Zealand, in recent times, the messages about the role to be played by universities as ‘critic and conscience’ have been mixed. On a qualified supportive side, the comment has been made: “While this unfettered right to be critic and conscience is fundamental to democracy and academic freedom, it carries with it the corresponding responsibilities of sound research and ethical application of knowledge” (Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, cited in Malcolm & Tarling, 2007, pp.194-195). On a withdrawal-of-support side, the threat to the university’s role is obvious in this New Zealand Treasury brief for a Minister of Finance: “The role of universities as social critic was [meaning ‘is’] superfluous in the information age” (Malcolm & Tarling, 2007, p.149).

From an American perspective, as in other parts of the world, universities are being asked to justify themselves in their various roles: “The ultimate question is this: Can the public be persuaded that universities represent something as ineffable as the common good – more specifically, that higher education contributes to the development of knowledgeable and responsible citizens, encourages social cohesion, promotes and spreads knowledge, increases social mobility, and stimulates the economy” (Kirp, 2003, p.263).

And from America there is a call to keep the education and business mix *in perspective*: “There is a place for the market ... but the market must be kept in its place” (Arthur Okun, 1975, cited in Kirp, 2003, p.7).

Being ‘critic and conscience’ involves questioning things as they are. It requires the surfacing of assumptions. There is a focus on protecting rights. There is a seeking of ‘truth’. Philosophies are questioned. Ill-fitting bases are discarded. For example, utilitarianism might be interpreted as an inappropriate “crude utilitarian vocationalism” accompanied by “fiscal constraints, a fascination for markets and so-called modernisation” (Burwood, 2003, p.297). There is exploration of relationships among disciplines. There is anticipatory consideration of the need for new models, changes of ‘game’, and shifts of paradigm.

Evidence that Universities Are Failing to Act as ‘Critic and Conscience of Society’

By remaining silent at times when its voice should be heard, a university shirks its responsibility to society. It shares the shame of injustice. It becomes a threat to its own existence. It retreats to a position outside the bounds of its conceptual ‘idea’.

In the past – before Newman but straddling the time of Fray Luis de León – the voice of the universities in the face of social injustice was faint. There was an absence of criticism directed at blatant examples of inaccessibility to higher education. Likewise, there was little resistance to the narrowing of fields of study on oppressive political, religious, and ideological grounds. Among such examples at the University of Salamanca in and around the times of the Spanish Inquisition were: rejection of minorities such as Moors, Jews, Jesuits, and Protestants; exclusion of boys from untitled families (and girls from any families); no teaching from any book that had been published within 40 years; no teaching of Descartes because he was considered “too compendious” or of Locke because he was “obscure and must be read with extreme care”; cessation of the teaching of mathematics and medicine; and discouragement of the study of Greek on the grounds that the ‘true Bible’ existed only in Latin (Michener, 1971). Where was the opposition to such oppression?

Occasionally, turning to more recent times at the starting point of our dig, an academic voice is heard. For example, in 1998 an emeritus professor of Victoria University of Wellington, Peter Munz, felt the need to express dissatisfaction about the intrusion of managerialism within the university and the consequential threat to academic values. Of great concern to him were comments by the vice-chancellor, Les Holborow, on what could or should be said in public by members of faculty. Munz argued in a letter to the press that the

institution was “being run as if it were a bank or a firm of stockbrokers” (Barrowman, 1999, p.365). Holborow defended himself in a staff newsletter and his reiterated views on communications made their way into the newspaper. The public perception was of a spat – university cannons turned upon each other – rather than worthwhile dialogue on an important topic.

Today, it seems, the voices of governments, policymakers, and industry are drowning out the too-compliant universities. Where are the strong objections to business models that have supplanted education models? Why has there been such ready acceptance of competitive approaches that stifle collaboration? Where are the suggestions of alternatives to neo-liberal philosophy and ‘New Right’ ideology and their emphasis on individual greed at the expense of social responsibility? Maybe the threat is not sufficiently obvious. “Academic life is not eliminated by neo-liberalism. It is tamed and more closely harnessed to economic interest and state control and hence to a particular kind of social order” (Marginson, 2006, p.2).

Unsuitable styles of management and governance have become commonplace. “Holders of academic power are increasingly required ‘to adopt managerial structures, mechanisms and values’. Research funding is more dependent on defining the research as ‘strategic’; research carried out ‘in the context of application’ is the norm, the pathway to innovation often begins in industry” (Henkel, cited in Marginson, 2006, pp.23-24). Despite the warnings of the past – “the management of a university faculty has no analogy to that of a business organisation” (Whitehead, 1950, p.149) – objections are few. Notwithstanding their realisation of the ‘crisis of identity’ of universities, comment on the topic by Malcolm and Tarling (2007, p.14) is measured: “New styles of ‘governance’ and ‘management’ might have something to offer; there has always been and will always be room for improvement. Such proposals and practices have, however, to be relevant to and supportive of the main objective.”

Pretenders in Mortarboard and Gown Disguises

Stealth-like, an inappropriate philosophical mix (with neo-liberalism dominant) has invaded the educational environment. It has led to a focus on economics to the detriment of a suitably wide range of disciplines. Hand in glove with it, there has been an inappropriate ‘channeling’ of universities by agents of the state. This has meant that “education has become a subset of wider economic policy” (Peters, 2005, p.630) and “learning has been explicitly identified as the main catalyst for economic competitiveness and growth” (ibid., p.629). As explained by Marginson (2006, p.18): “Capitalist production develops only where it is profitable. In universities this includes some tuition-based programs, for example the education of foreign students in the UK and Australia, and commercial research which constitutes a small proportion of total research activity.” The same has been true in New Zealand. Enforcement of intellectual conformity has typically been the result. Most universities as ‘critic and conscience’ have preferred truancy to talk.

Many universities no longer have a meaningful relationship between teaching and research. Being on top of a ‘league table’ is more important to them than the social constructivist exploration of ‘new territories’. Sometimes the relationship between funder and researcher gets in the way of truthful reporting – an acute issue when “a large share of the available funds is allocated to purposes pre-selected on the basis of political decisions” (Thorens, 2006, p.100).

There has been an emphasis on quality that has stultified in-depth, imaginative learning and research. There is a “mantra of ‘quality, relevant’ education” (Roberts, 2007, p.6). Whose ‘quality’? Whoever the owner might be, obsession has supplanted sufficiency. Quality assurance is layer upon layer. “Audit is the control of control”, notes Marginson (2006, p.22). And audit of audit? Where does it end? And relevant to whom? The questions are infrequently put.

Also, rather than resistance, there has been acceptance and use of language that is anachronistic to the ‘idea of a university’. Buzzwords and terms such as ‘globalisation’, ‘world-class standards’, ‘the information age’, ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘massification of tertiary education’, ‘interdisciplinary curricula’, ‘the learner as consumer’, ‘investing in a plan’, and ‘marketisation’ abound. Only occasionally is the usage questioned. Missing is an assessment of the damage done. Absent is the delegated role-player of ‘critic and conscience’.

Why the lack of voice? One reason relates to smoke (maybe ‘cannon smoke’) and mirrors. There has been a proliferation of institutions that may be of some use but which are misnamed as ‘universities’. They don’t really see themselves as such. Their notions are foggy. They don’t reflect the values. An extreme example is Hamburger University, McDonald’s training headquarters in Chicago. “Only in name is ‘Hamburger University’ a university; and despite the fact that some community colleges award course credit for the experience, its certificate in ‘hamburgerology’ isn’t a higher education credential” (Kirp, 2003, p.255). Even the thought of the misappropriated name is hard to digest.

The situation can be seen as a “degree of ‘inter-breeding’ between the sectors of post-compulsory education” (Peters, 2005, p.628). There has been bastardisation by the exhortations of industry and policymaking of governments. Neo-liberalism – with its extreme commitment to the ‘free market’, individual freedom (which translates as selfishness), and the reduction of state intervention and welfare (to the benefit of the ‘meritorious’ few over the ‘undeserving’ many) – provides an unsound philosophical foundation. Many of the institutions have been granted degree-awarding powers but are unappreciative of their wider roles. Their students frequently find themselves in unsuitable programmes of study. They are designing or unsuspecting victims in a world too full of ‘diploma mills’ and ‘red sheds’ posing as ‘red-brick buildings’ (the ‘red shed’ tag applying to a warehoused business well-known throughout the cities and towns of New Zealand). If they study with the University of Phoenix or a similarly, unashamedly franchised commercial model, they may come to see themselves as ‘customers’ of a ‘Drive-Thru U’ (Kirp, 2003, p.240).

The use of deliberately generalised terms confuses. “One notable aspect of the public debate so far is how politicians have fallen over themselves to ask ‘What is higher education for?’ or ‘What is the value of higher education?’ Rarely, if ever, have they asked ‘What are universities for?’ or ‘What is the value of a university education?’” (Burwood, 2003, p.298) Frequently and insidiously, universities are smothered by the blanket term of ‘tertiary institutions’.

The problem is not new: As stated by Whitehead (1950, p.136): “this growth of universities, in size, and in internal complexity of organization, discloses some danger of destroying the very sources of their usefulness”. However, the scale is now greater. The distortion within and without is severe. The complications have compounded.

What Is and Should Be: Exemplars and Examples

A combination of a number of essential parts comprises the university as a whole. It is composed of sustained in-depth learning by a community of scholars, teaching integrated with research, an international focus (which includes local considerations), a role as a repository of knowledge and another as critic and conscience of society.

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, Harvard University is an exemplar. It epitomises the inter-generational approach to higher education and has done so over the decades of its distinguished existence. As put by Whitehead (1950, p.152), a past member of its community of scholars, “the gift which the University has to offer is the old one of imagination, the lighted torch which passes from hand to hand. It is a dangerous gift, which has started many a conflagration.”

The fires have not destroyed the institution. Rather, it has warded off its metaphorically threatening cannon balls and prospered. Harvard’s publications are wide-ranging and influential. They ‘push the boundaries’. Howard Gardner’s recent book, *Five Minds for the Future*, is an example. As ‘critic and conscience’ he expresses his belief that policymakers the world over have not come to grips adequately with major factors:

To be specific: rather than stating our precepts explicitly, we continue to assume that educational goals and values are self-evident. We acknowledge the importance of science and technology but do not teach scientific ways of thinking, let alone how to develop individuals with the synthesizing and creative capacities essential for continual scientific and technological progress. And too often, we think of science as the prototype of all knowledge, rather than one

powerful way of knowing that needs to be complemented by artistic and humanistic and perhaps also spiritual stances. We acknowledge the factors of globalisation – at least when they are called to our attention – but have not figured out how to prepare youngsters so that they can survive and thrive in a world different from one ever known or ever imagined before (Gardner, 2007, p.17).

And what are his ‘minds’ that in combination offer hope? First: “*The disciplined mind* has mastered at least one way of thinking – a distinctive mode of cognition that characterizes a special scholarly discipline, craft, or profession” (ibid., p.3). Second: “*The synthesizing mind* takes information from disparate sources, understands and evaluates that information objectively, and puts it together in ways that make sense to the synthesizer and also to other persons” (ibid.). Third: “Building on discipline and synthesis, *the creating mind* breaks new ground. It puts forth new ideas, poses unfamiliar questions, conjures up fresh ways of thinking, arrives at unexpected answers” (ibid.). Fourth: “Recognizing that nowadays one can no longer remain within one’s shell or on one’s home territory, *the respectful mind* notes and welcomes differences between human individuals and between human groups, tries to understand these ‘others’, and seeks to work effectively with them” (ibid.). Fifth: “Proceeding on a level more abstract than the respectful mind, *the ethical mind* ponders the nature of one’s work and the needs and desires of the society in which one lives” (ibid.).

The respectful mind has direct relevance to the role of universities as ‘critic and conscience’. It is a tempering catalyst. As indicated by Gardner (ibid., p.113):

A truly respectful individual offers the benefit of the doubt to all human beings. As much as possible, she avoids thinking in group terms. She reserves censure for those who truly deserve it. She remains open to the possibility that her judgement may have been wrong. And she is on the alert for a change in behaviour that will in turn reinstate a feeling of respect toward that other individual.

Respect is beyond ‘political tolerance’, which “is essentially negative, requiring us only to refrain (or be prepared to refrain) from interfering with what another does” (Snook, 2004, p.6). It is akin to tolerance as a virtue, “which requires us to find value in the thoughts and actions of others” (ibid.). Social constructivism – with its portrayal of the world as imaginatively made and invented by people rather than taken for granted – provides a philosophical basis.

Holding Fire: Occasions for Less-than-Free Speech

Given the openness of the respectful mind, there are times when ‘free speech’ is inappropriate. Should it have prevailed in favour of French authorities, for example, when Muslim girls and women were barred from wearing veils and other religious clothing at traditionally secular schools? Gardner (2007, pp.118-119), for one, had second thoughts. “Weighing the costs to the women of the deprivation of an important part of their religion, and realising that the veils did not really impinge on anyone else’s liberties, I concluded that respect should trump a longstanding norm.” And should the voices extolling the ‘right’ of Danish newspapers to publish cartoons highly critical of Muslim leaders and practices have remained loud and long? Again, Gardner (ibid., p.119) had a change of mind and heart.

...when I detected the degree of hurt felt by Muslim persons all over the world and – eventually – learned of the violence that ensued, I reconsidered my initial leanings. Cartoons are a particularly vicious form of ridicule, and especially insulting to those who are unfamiliar with that idiom. While artists should be allowed to draw what they like, and newspaper editorialists should feel free to criticize any and all institutions, the damage done by publication of the cartoons seems excessive and unnecessary. Neither the artists nor the free press would have suffered unduly if the critiques had been expressed in words, rather than pictures.

Notably, it is the medium rather than the message that is Gardner’s focus in the second example. Accordingly, because he believes the medium is appropriate in this different situation, he “would continue to

defend the right of Salman Rushdie to publish *The Satanic Verses*, and of course condemn those who issued a fatwa on him”. His overall message is clear: “I cite these examples not to insist that respect should always trump other virtues, nor to indicate that my changes of heart were necessarily correct. Rather, in the complex global terrain in which we now live, we should, whenever possible, give priority to respect for those with different backgrounds and beliefs – and hope that they will return the favour” (ibid., p.119). Again, conscience tempers the role of critic. The associated parts are played on an appropriate philosophical stage.

Constructivism as a philosophy is also the basis for a focus on the development of wisdom beyond fact and knowledge. “Exploration and discovery lie at the base of every human achievement and aspiration. The knowledge that leads to wisdom opens new vistas and discloses how little we really do know. Wisdom suffers no pretence that one has arrived. Knowledge can be mastered, but wisdom can only be sought” (Weigel, 2002, pp.139-140).

Tiered (Not Tired) Wisdom and Positioning Principles

In relation to ‘what might be’, Weigel (ibid., pp.54-57) suggests the options for higher education institutions in the new ‘electronic era’ – a time of ‘bricks and clicks’ – depend on strategic assets and capabilities. There will be ‘top-tier institutions’ which “will likely emerge unscathed from the mass-produced distance education battle” (ibid., p.54), ‘global universities’ which “will be able to take advantage of the demand for mass-produced distance education” (ibid., p.55), and ‘all other institutions’ which “will be able to survive, and even thrive, in an era of mass-produced distance education if they can differentiate their educational offerings in an intentional, proactive manner” (ibid., p.56). Of the three categories – top-tier, global, other – and based on discussion of the ‘idea of a university’ in this paper, few institutions outside the top tier would be worthy of the name. The advice is straightforward. If they are ‘institutes of technology’, ‘colleges of the arts’, ‘private training establishments’, or whatever, call them that – not ‘universities’.

With a focus on higher education in New Zealand, specifically, Malcolm and Tarling’s (2007) *Crisis of Identity?* provides a set of principles for universities: “Principle One: The collective identity of knowledge as pursued and promoted by a university must always reflect, respect and nurture its essential human characteristics” (Malcolm & Tarling, 2007, p.223). “Principle Two: The primary motivation for seeking and advancing knowledge in a university must be a desire for truth – the continuing expression of which is always evolving in response to human experience and understanding and which is supportive of human well-being” (ibid., p.224). “Principle Three: Within the necessary diversity of academic activities in a university, each programme must reflect and contribute to the integrating values and characteristics of universal knowledge, such values and knowledge providing an essential and comprehensive unity to a university’s engagement in teaching and research at the highest levels” (ibid., p.228). “Principle Four: “Collegial participation and responsibility in a university are essential and distinguishing features of its academic life” (ibid., p.231). “Principle Five: Governance and management in a university must reflect and embrace the collegial spirit and character of its academic life” (ibid., p.232). “Principle Six: The interdependence of governance and management in a university, and their collegial aspects, must find full and balanced expression within all areas of its academic life” (ibid., p.237).

The humane and communal aspects are embedded. The quest for truth and well-being is essential. Integration of teaching and research is emphasised. Collegiality in place of managerialism is stressed. The crisis of identity is addressed. The role of ‘critic and conscience’ is played throughout the narrative.

There is relevance to the case of Lloyd Geering (and in contrast to the case of Fray Luis de León). Geering as a controversial member and head of a theological school of the Presbyterian Church was able to defend himself as an accused heretic (something Fray Luis de León was never able to do in relation to whatever the accusation might have been) and was acquitted. Unlike our chosen figure of contrast, Geering came to be lauded as a professor of theology at Victoria University of Wellington and was awarded three ‘gongs’ (Order of the British Empire, New Zealand Order of Merit, Order of New Zealand) by the Governor-General on behalf of the Queen of England in celebration of his ‘critic and conscience’ achievements (*The Dominion Post*, Friday, August 31, 2007).

Geering's treatment by the university and society was exemplary. Fray Luis de León's was not. After his five years of unjust imprisonment, he was allowed to return to the University of Salamanca for a brief period but was then once more imprisoned without trial. True to his beliefs to the end but cut from his community of scholars, he died in what his contemporaries were only too willing to accept as 'disgrace'.

Conclusion: A Focus on Images 'Lest We Forget'

Mock though the fire of the cannon that points at Victoria University of Wellington may be, the symbolic threat is real. Metaphors around the globe are militaristic. The warnings should chill. For example: "Higher education has suddenly become a key battleground in British domestic politics and proposals abound from both government and opposition alike. However, even elemental issues such as its aims and values, and not just practical concerns like an effective and equitable method of funding, are up for discussion. Be afraid. Be very afraid" (Burwood, 2003, p.297).

Choice of suitable philosophical bases is crucial – perhaps liberalism combined with social constructivism. The 'minds' that need to be developed for the present and future, as articulated by Gardner (2007), warrant serious consideration. The need for a mix of disciplinary, synthesising, and creating minds makes sense from an academic perspective. As completers of the mix, the need for respectful and ethical minds is compatible with the university's role as 'critic and conscience of society'.

Some institutions act as critic but not as conscience. Comments are 'quick fire' and ill judged. Some may see themselves as a (or 'the') conscience of society but do not act as critic. Dialogue occurs in the lecture halls, corridors, and staff rooms of the institutions. Discussion ricochets off the coffee urns and water coolers of informal learning spaces but is not transmitted to society at large. Debate is cloistered. How often? Who knows? Frustratingly – even tragically (for the likes of Fray Luis de León) – well-considered criticism is not widely shared.

For the genuine universities – those with a focus on wisdom rather than hamburgerology; those with 'Shakespeare' and 'Einstein' as determiners (not slaves) of the 'bottom line' – being a 'critic and conscience of society' includes being a critic and conscience of themselves. Nothing less would be acceptable. However, rather than being heard as a concerted voice, the articulation typically comes from a member of faculty to the discomfort of a bureaucrat or hierarchical position-holder.

It is important to understand a university in terms of what it is not. This facilitates an appreciation of its conceptual fragility. "In this context, one must be aware of the dangers of the present trend of wanting universities to offer 'returns', and more especially economic and immediate returns, and of transforming them into high level vocational schools. This would make them lose their specificity and change them into another kind of institution, which is obviously useful but serves another purpose (Thorens, 2006, p.90). As a result of this trend there are a number of institutions that are 'universities' in name only. The obvious example is Hamburger University. There are many others that are driven by business entrepreneurs in mortarboard and gown disguises.

University education is about inter-generationally shared wisdom in dynamic mindscapes. The need for universities to be 'critic and conscience of society' is "to avoid the dictatorship of a given political system, or a superpower and, today no less, the hegemony of the economic world and the large multinationals, more powerful than many countries" (ibid., p.108). "Society and the State must of their own accord and in their well-understood interest abstain from wanting to determine everything and accept the harsh and sometimes even unjust criticism of the university and the members of the academic community if they want the university to be able fully to play its role in the service of mankind and society, its very *raison d'être*" (ibid., p.98).

Clearly, a truant mentality as 'critic and conscience of society' is out of place. As put by Burwood (2003, p.300): "There is a challenge for academics in relation to the wider world. This is to find new ways to give voice to what many readily take to be a core aspect of their current mission: this is the querying of the dominant consensus and its presuppositions and the disclosing of other possibilities; not simply being responsive to its needs."

The invitation is there for the taking. Too often there is evidence that universities are failing to act as critic and conscience. The exceptions are few. The University of Salamanca failed Fray Luis de León, the people of Spain, and society in general. Over time, it has drifted from its purpose, roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities. It has not acted as ‘critic and conscience’. It has a crisis of identity. Many others share the anxiety. Frequently, over recent decades, it is because the interests of business have overridden those of education. ‘New right’ ideology, in particular, with its emphasis on the ‘private good’, has threatened the development of ‘the educated person’. Victoria University of Wellington, in accepting Lloyd Geering as a member of its ‘community of scholars’, has shown that in this one instance at the very least it acts as ‘critic and conscience of society’.

Images can translate as activators. On the other side of the world from Wellington, New Zealand, in an “austere little plaza”, the University of Salamanca is guarded by the spirit of and “presided over by the statue of a professor in robes, Fray Luis de León” (Michener, 1971, p.409). The statue – like the cannon that points at Victoria University of Wellington – is a reminder to universities of their crucial role as ‘critic and conscience of society’. It is a message that should not be lost on people in general.

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