

UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION

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Juan Manuel Mora

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I. STUDENTS AT THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION ENTERPRISE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by quoting the opening paragraph of a commentary article by Janan Ganesh published in the *Financial Times* on 21 April 2015, the day prior to the opening of the international conference on *Building Universities' Reputation* hosted in Pamplona by the University of Navarra:

In *the world of universities*, the word “brand” itself has a bad brand. At best, it sounds shallow. At worst, it evokes a marketing spiv. Swap the B-word for “reputation” and suddenly it is easier to talk about this decisive *educational* variable. For nobody doubts that a *university's* reputation – its image and perceived values, the gut reaction created by a mention of its name – goes a long way to determining its prospects.

The relevance of the points is evident notwithstanding that Ganesh was not speaking about universities but about political parties - for “the world of universities” read “politics”, for “educational” read “electoral”, and for “a university's” read “a party's”. Ganesh was writing in the midst of electoral campaigning prior to the UK 2015 General Election and reflecting in particular on the reputation of the Conservative party. His general point was that voter's ballot decisions are as much dependent on their general impression of the character of a political party as they are on their views of that party's particular policies and manifesto. Likewise for many people including prospective undergraduates and their parents, choices in applications to universities are based on apparent general character as much if not more than on specifics of courses or prospectuses. Here I wish to explore

these issues not from the perspective of sociology or economics but from that of educational philosophy.

2. INTERPRETING RANKINGS WHEN CHOOSING UNIVERSITY

As is noted in the very useful position paper “The Reputation of Universities” coauthored by Víctor Pérez-Díaz and Juan Carlos Rodríguez (“Appendix” 85-118), and as is discussed in other contributions, the issue of universities’ reputations has been transformed by the development of international university rankings as well as by national publicly funded teaching-quality and research assessment exercises, and by independent discipline-based and institutional reviews and guides.

There has been much professional discussion of the methodologies involved in these diverse modes of evaluation but what is of greatest interest to most constituencies, or ‘publics’ as Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez term them, namely *students, academic staff, administrators and managers, public officials, potential employers* and the *general public*, are the *results*. Apart from the issue of different criteria used in evaluations there is the fact that the products are notoriously amenable to selective display. It is often said that the intended purpose of such reviews, surveys and rankings is to *inform* potential students, employers and funding sources but I doubt that anyone who was not already well informed could read far into them, or know what to make of divergent rankings.

I will mention just one example, and loyalty and familiarity dispose me to choose my own institution, the University of St. Andrews¹. Founded in 1413 it is the third oldest university in the English-speaking world following Oxford and Cambridge. It also follows immediately behind them in the order Cambridge, Oxford, St. Andrews in the 2015 *Guardian* (“University League”), and in the *Times* and *Sunday Times* university guides (O’Leary), and is placed 4th in the UK *Complete University Guide* League table with the LSE placed 3rd. As regards international tables it is 39th in the most recent CWTS Leiden ranking – with Cambridge 19th and Oxford 24th, but in the QS rankings Cambridge and Oxford appear as joint 2nd and as 5th

¹ Since delivering this presentation to the Pamplona conference I have, while continuing on the faculty of St. Andrews, taken up a permanent position in the United States at Baylor University in Texas. As is familiar with senior academic positions in the US the position is named for a private donor to the University, in this case J. Newton Rayzor Senior. The question of reputation so far as Baylor and other private and public US universities is concerned and how it is assessed and presented is a whole other story, a beginning to which might be made by consulting such rankings as that of US News and World Report.

while St. Andrews comes in at 88th; and in the *Times Higher World Rankings* Oxford is 3rd, Cambridge 5th and St. Andrews 111th, though 33rd for Arts and Humanities.

What would it be reasonable to conclude from these results taken together? Two main things, I think: first that Oxford and Cambridge are the leading UK universities, nationally and internationally; and second, that while St. Andrews, which is a much smaller and much poorer institution², is a very good British university when viewed in world context, it lies well behind larger multi-faculty institutions.

These judgements are broadly correct but I think that to some extent they lead rather than follow the assessments. What I mean is that in guides and rankings, there is an element of reputational a priorism based on shared assumptions about the nature of universities. It is worth thinking about these assumptions because they relate to what, I suggest, remains the primary role of universities, namely the teaching of undergraduates in traditional disciplines. I am not now concerned, therefore, with the issue of ‘prestige bias’ complained about by scholars as it is said to influence appointment and publication decisions and peer reviews (Oprisko; Colander and Zhuo; Clauset, Arbesman and Larremore), though I agree with Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez when they write that “to a great extent, academic life, especially in its research dimension, has very similar characteristics to those of a reputation market” (“Appendix” 103). As such it is liable, I think, to the same distortions and deceptions. I should say that the issue of ‘prestige bias’ also bears on the issue of graduate employment and it is a long-standing complaint of graduates of other universities, particularly civic and provincial ones, that Oxbridge students benefit unfairly in securing employment in professional and other high prestige high reward occupations from having attended those universities.

The source of the shared assumptions about what is likely to be best is a certain picture of the university as consisting in whole or in part of a community of scholar-teachers and students gathered in recognisably scholastic surroundings, reading great works as part of the study of academic disciplines. It is no accident, I suggest, that however quaint this image may seem in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, nine hundred years after the founding of Bologna, Oxford and Salamanca,

² Approximate endowments and student numbers are respectively: Cambridge £5,000,000,000 and 19,500; Oxford £4,500,000,000 and 25,500; St. Andrews £50,000,000 and 9,500. That is an endowment per student of £256,000 for Cambridge; £180,000 for Oxford; and £5,250 for St. Andrews. In other words the per capita endowment of Cambridge is 50 times that of St. Andrews. By way of further comparison Princeton University has a student body of 9,000 and an endowment of £14,000,000,000 i.e. £1,750,000 per student, 333 times that of St. Andrews and approximately 90 times that of Cambridge. Given these discrepancies in wealth it is likely that we will see further differentiation among institutions resulting in sharper reputational focus.

it is one to which the universities I mentioned do in fact conform, and at the heart of this is the teaching of undergraduates.

3. PERSPECTIVES ON REPUTATION

The position paper cites an encyclopedia article by the American sociologist Gary Alan Fine in which he distinguishes objective, functionalist and social construction accounts of reputation (“Appendix” 99) and goes on to endorse a definition of reputation by another American sociologist, Ronald Burt, according to whom it is “the extent to which a person or group or organization is known to be trustworthy” (qtd. in “Appendix” 100). Certainly one may take different perspectives on the idea of reputation while thinking that the status itself has a common character, but the idea of trustworthiness is too close to moralizing, I think, and one might instead speak of reliability and associated value³. More to the point, however, is Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez’s observation that reputations may be general or specific, regional or global, and perceived by one or more ‘publics’ and the consequent question of whether these dimensions may be consolidated or reduced. The authors write as follows:

Supposing that all or some of these ‘reputations’ do exist, there remains one last question to address, that if all these aspects, components or contents of reputation are reducible to a single dimension or just a few dimensions so that one can speak of the reputation of a given university and not only about the research reputation, the professional training reputation, the education of elites reputation, etc. (“Appendix” 106).

Strictly speaking, the attribution of reputational standing is not absolute but aspectual (not *dictum simpliciter* but *dictum secundum quid* as the Iberian logicians of old would have said) and there are a number of different features in respect of which a university may be well regarded. MIT, for example, is highly rated in respect of the acquisition of new knowledge particularly as that might be applied practically, and its undergraduate education is limited and conditioned by its overall research orientation. This character derives from concerns to turn scientific intelligence towards practice and innovation, but I suggest that it should be seen as an outgrowth of the main body of university education which is for the sake not of research or of professional training but for that of inducting undergraduates into

³ Rupert Younger of Oxford University Center for Corporate Reputation proposes a definition of reputation as consisting of expectations of an individual's or institution's future behavior based on perceptions of past behavior (see “Corporate Reputation” 40).

the study of nature both general and specific, and among the latter pre-eminently *human nature*: such is the basis for the distinction between the sciences and the humanities.

Both consist primarily of sets of disciplines but universities also teach and research in subjects, and studies. A *discipline* is marked by three features:

1. an enduring, if periodically changing, menu of questions or problems,
2. a canon of major texts, and
3. a broad methodology.

I am inclined to add a fourth feature which is intelligibly if not logically related to the other three, namely that a discipline admits of genius; and certainly the cultural association of this with academic activity is connected to disciplines. Certainly there may be developments and disagreements with respect to menus, texts and methodologies. Some questions lead into other fields. There is also coming and going in the canon both of authors and of texts, and methodologies likewise emerge, depart and return. The point remains, however, that throughout the histories of disciplines there are these three elements.

Scientific disciplines overlap with but also are distinguishable from *humanities* ones in several ways. First they originate in and remain answerable to common observation and its relative experiment. Second, they seek to account for what is observed in broadly causal and material terms. Third, they are cumulative and progressive: in general in a science the latest is the best, this being explicable by the process of observation and experiment serving as filters on and test of hypotheses. Like humanities disciplines, sciences have a broad menu of questions or problems to deal with (again subject to modification and specification) and they have enduring methodologies, but the counterpart to a canon is barely historical, viz. latest, best integrated theory.

While disciplines in general are defined by their subject matter, an academic *subject* may not itself be a discipline, though typically it will operate in a given place or time in relation to one or more humanities or sciences. *Subjects* emerged in the 19th century the conscious development of educational curricula and syllabi and they may be quite general or highly specific: languages, Literature, Anthropology, Geology and Hydraulics are examples of subjects. With *studies* there is a further broadening out and also an overlapping of *subjects* and *disciplines*. There are also weaker and more evidently interest-relative principles of gathering of content. Communication, Cultural, Environmental, Family, Gender, Regional, and Women's studies are familiar examples, and what they also suggest is the orientation of studies to practice and policy, often with a political aspect.

4. FOUNDATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Given the foundational priority of disciplines there is a corresponding educational priority so far as grounding understanding is concerned. However, far enquiries may move away from disciplines the latter remain the life –and form–giving roots of properly higher (and not just tertiary) education.

Until relatively recently, such an education was the privilege of the few, but increasingly it is seen as a right of the many; and governments also favor mass participation in higher studies as contributing to economic and social development. This latter justification was first voiced in Germany in the nineteenth century and taken up in the United States in a movement designed to progress from colleges to universities, as from places of teaching to ones of research and development. It then became widespread in the second half of the last century and in all its pure instances is prey to the criticism of instrumentalizing education. Such doctrines are philosophically problematic in that they overlook, or sets aside the idea that the value of education is intrinsic to it. In particular, coming to understand a concept, or a theory, or a practice, constitutes one of the goods of human life quite apart from the question of whether it provides utilitarian benefit.

One of the places where this notion was influential was at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and it is interesting to read the inaugural address of Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of the University, delivered in 1876. Gilman was a graduate in Geography from Yale and returned there in his early twenties working to establish a Scientific School to which he was then appointed as Professor of Geography. A decade later, having been passed over for the Yale presidency and after a short period as president of the University of California, he was appointed to the role of establishing and serving as president of Johns Hopkins. On the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation in 1926 *Time* magazine published an article referring to Gilman and his inaugural address describing him as “the father of the graduate school, the great apostle of university research”. There are grounds for the latter in the text itself. I quote from his conclusion:

Let us now, as we draw near the close of this allotted hour, turn from details and recur to general principles. What are we aiming at? An enduring foundation; a slow development; first local, then regional, then national influence; the most liberal promotion of all useful knowledge; the special provision of such departments as are elsewhere neglected in the country; a generous affiliation with all other institutions, avoiding interferences, and engaging in no rivalry; the encouragement of research; the promotion of young men; and the advancement of individual scholars, who by their excellence will advance the sciences they pursue, and the society where they dwell. No words could indicate our aim more fitly than those by which John Henry Newman

expresses his “Idea of the University,” in a page burning with enthusiasm, to which I delight to revert (Gilman).

The invocation of Newman is unintentionally ironic, for Gilman’s distinctive vision, and that of the advocates of German-inspired research institutes and professional schools, would have been anathema to the author of what remains the greatest single work on the subject of higher education as an induction into academic disciplines. From the present perspective, what is most salient in Newman’s account of the nature and value of university education is what it *excludes*. In particular he thought that it was not the business of universities to engage in research, writing that

[A university] 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 of it. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students “Idea University 4”.

If this seems alien to the utilitarian spirit of its own times let alone to the hyper-utilitarianism of ours, consider the observations advanced by the progressive liberal utilitarian John Stuart Mill fifteen years later and nine years before Gilman’s inaugural. The occasion was that of Mill’s election as Rector of the University of St. Andrews and his audience was the student body. Mill thought that the main purpose of a university was to cultivate wisdom in those who were capable of it. He writes:

[A university] is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skillful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings. It is very right that there should be public facilities for the study of professions. But these things are no part of what every generation owes to the next, as that on which its civilisation and worth will principally depend (5).

Newman was not against research, but believed it should be conducted in special institutes. Mill likewise thought that the fact that certain activities are important for individuals and society does not mean they should be part of the university curriculum. Wherever we may now think, it apt to draw distinctions, and however widely we might let the notion of a university range, it remains possible and important to recognize the concerns of Newman and Mill which we might follow them in expressing in terms of the distinction between *knowledge* and *understanding*. Newman in particular was concerned that, as well as coming

to know about the particular and the *temporary*, human beings need to form an understanding of the *general* and the *permanent*, especially as these relate to the human condition.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Likewise, in thinking about universities and their reputations we should acknowledge that a large part of what the 'primary publics' need and what they themselves associate with the likes of Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews and many other such institutions is the business of cultivating minds towards the achievement of broad understanding. This is the work of undergraduate education and it is best done through the study not of subjects or of studies but of disciplines. To take all of that seriously requires putting students, and in particular undergraduates, at the heart of the university education enterprise. In doing that we will also have a chance of leading society rather than following it, and of securing merited approbation and hence the reputation of being the places where rising generations are instructed in the most important kind of learning it is possible to have, namely that of the nature of the world and of the place of human beings within it.

The evidence is that institutions that have this reputation attract well-qualified and interested students who, in turn, encourage others, and in later years direct their own children towards the same or similar universities. Issues of research and knowledge transfer have their place, but it is for these students at least a secondary position to that of learning and understanding what Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, first published in the same year as Mill's St. Andrews rectorial address, referred to as the best which has been thought and said.