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The Uncomfortable View from the Ivory Tower

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Abstract

The history of universities is a complicated story of challenges and crises through which their nature and character has often been called into question. As we proceed through the early decades of the 21st century, universities are perhaps once again in a precarious state. Have they lost their way? Considering arguments on higher education by the Prussian polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt and the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, I argue that a central aspect of the character of universities is that they are home to uncomfortable ideas. In this regard universities – perhaps even more now than they were before – are a very particular kind of institution, and very particular places, in which uncomfortable, critical, and conflicting ideas, as well as the academic attitude with which such issues can be approached and appreciated, must be enshrined and protected. This, I suggest, is not just a matter of how universities operate. Rather, it is fundamental to the significance of universities as social institutions that not only produce knowledge and educate, and which are important centres of innovation, interdisciplinarity, and at times unorthodox ways of thinking, but which are also crucial symbols of the values of open and knowledge-driven societies.

Introduction to crisis

My talk today concerns the importance of uncomfortable ideas within universities, and the unique and profoundly important role that universities play within the educational, cultural, and economic landscape of the country.

I think it can be argued that, in a rather important sense, universities have lost their way. To say that something has lost its way implies that there was a direction or a path – although not necessarily a destination – in mind. I'll come back to this, but first, I'd like to preface that discussion by considering briefly the current context of UK higher education which forms the backdrop to establishing this group.

That higher education across the western world in general, and the UK higher education sector (for my purposes here) in particular, is in a state of crisis and precarity is, I think, beyond question. Sector-wide organizational failures, the knock-on effects of the economic underperformance and the cost-of-living crisis, political engineering, and cultural turbulence have produced a profound instability and the palpable danger of deep and potentially catastrophic upheaval in universities and the HE system. Pulling this apart would be a task for a very different talk, but I will say that implicit in this crisis and instability, is the question of what universities are and what they are for. We can see this, for example, in the arguments made for and against the restrictions on international student visas, in the claims that higher education is perhaps a waste of money, in arguments over course closures and the relative merits of different disciplines, and in many other issues facing HE – all of which engage some kind of argument about the nature and purpose of universities.

These are broad issues, and not new, and there are plenty of important ways these could be approached. I want to emphasize just one particular and especially contemporary dimension: the significance of uncomfortable ideas.

I presume that everybody here is familiar with the notion of academic freedom. The idea, more-or-less, that people working in academia have the freedom to carry out teaching and research as they see fit; so long as those activities fall within the stipulations of their contracts, within the law, and, somewhat more loosely, within the professional and intellectual standards of their discipline. I presume also that at least most people are aware that the idea of academic freedom – what it is, what it is for, and its limits – have become something of a culture war political football in recent years. I don't want to make too much of this as it is only one aspect of the overall issue, but there have been a number of sometimes high-profile instances of well-respected, senior academics having funding or institutional support withdrawn, research programmes closed, or finding themselves being 'no-platformed' or their engagements cancelled, because some people disagreed with their arguments. Worse still, many have been personally threatened, harassed, and bullied on campus;[1] even driven from jobs or academia in general,[2] all for carrying out their work in accordance with their own scholarly judgement.

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[1] Bindel, J. (2021) 'Kathleen Stock: I Won't be Silenced', *UnHerd* (4th November 2021). Available: https://unherd.com/2021/11/kathleen-stock-i-wont-be-silenced/.
Attenborough, F. (2024) 'Harvard Professor needed armed protection after publishing research that challenged woke orthodoxies', *Free Speech Union* (20th February 2024). Available: https://freespeechunion.org/harvard-professor-needed-armed-protection-after-publishing-research-that-challenged-woke-orthodoxies/.
[2] BBC (2021) 'Kathleen Stock: University of Sussex free speech row professor quits', *BBC News* (29th October 2021). Available: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-59084446.

More broadly, the independent voices of academics have also been undermined and called into question. The notable – even if in the end spectacularly uneventful – move by Michelle Donelan, the Minister for Science, Innovation and Technology, to call into question the ability of academics attached to the UKRI, with influence over funding, to act impartially, and to separate their political interests from their academic judgement, for instance.[3]

To this we can also add concerns over student voice and activism on campus. In 2021 the Department of Education released a White Paper[4] outlining the government's defence of freedom of speech within universities in which they made use of a study carried out at King's College London that had found that around 25% of students of all political persuasions reported feeling unable to express their views honestly in classrooms.[5] This is also evident in terms of student activism. Student protests of course are nothing new – university campuses have a strong history of being sites where protests can, and have, taken place – but a significant amount of recent activism has not been so much about voicing views as it has been about trying to prevent opposing voices from being heard: no-platforming, occupying lecture theatres, or otherwise refusing other students access to classrooms, talks, screenings or other events.[6] While the events at US universities are rather more dramatic, activities that are, in principle, no different occur here.[7] Notably, a significant amount of the hostility and censorship of academic voices has come, not from external agencies, but from students themselves.

This issue is complicated by the attitude, prevalent in some quarters, brought about largely by the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, which sees academia is seen as an educational product sold to consumer-students. It is a small and fairly direct extension of the idea that students are paying customers to the view that education, and the ideas taught in universities, are commodities about which student-purchasers can make demands. Even if we disregard the extremes, in which students

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[3] Fox, F. (2024) 'The UKRI-Donelan furore is a wake-up call on the politicization of science', *Times Higher Education* (7th March 2024); republished *Science Media Centre* (14th March 2024). Available: https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/the-ukri-donelan-furore-is-a-wake-up-call-on-the-politicisation-of-science/

[4] DfE (2021) *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom*, CP 394, Department for Education. Available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/602a916be90e0705633431c8/Higher_education_free_speech_and_academic_freedom.pdf.

[5] King's College London (2019) *Freedom of expression in UK universities*.

[6] Baum, N. (2024) 'I'm a Zionist at Columbia University: The Protesters at Hamilton Hall were a threat to students like me', *Forward* (3rd May 2024). Available: https://forward.com/opinion/609709/zionist-student-jewish-columbia-hamilton-hall-protests/.
Shearing, H. and Nagesh, A. (2024) 'Universities UK say protests may require action' *BBC News* (9th May 2024). Available: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cqen1j2ey40o.

[7] Recently in Durham when a debate on the Israel-Hamas war at the Durham Union Society was cancelled following disruption and protest by activist students (see https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/notices/dus-debate-/).

might feel entitled to dictate course content, or express dissatisfaction at universities employing, or 'platforming' people or views which they do not share, the fact remains that students can 'vote with their feet', and universities, especially those most dependent on the income from tuition fees, can feel exposed to the dangers associated with the kinds of bad publicity that might affect student recruitment.

These issues are not exclusive to universities. The campus culture wars are but one theatre in a broader conflict over freedom of speech and the place for opposing views. I give this talk against the background of two pieces of legislation, introduced in the past few months, that have implications for the reality of freedom of speech. The *Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act (2021),*[8] which aims to tackle a 'rising tide of hatred', but which has met much criticism on the grounds that broadens the very problematic notion of 'hate' and 'hate-speech' to such an extent as to stifles freedom of speech and debate; and the Westminster government's anti-extremism legislation,[9] which has likewise been challenged on the grounds that it threatens to smother and demonize much relevant and useful debate in the – albeit important – cause of tackling domestic extremism.

To a large extent, I think all these issues might be considered as a general concern over the value of uncomfortable ideas, and a perhaps pathological social problem with how we understand and approach beliefs, opinions, facts, and arguments that we might find disagreeable, objectionable, offensive, or which otherwise make us uncomfortable.

These issues, as I say, go beyond universities, but universities are a very significant – and a very particular – centre for these concerns, because uncomfortable ideas sit right at the heart of universities as institutions and their place in the fabric of society. To talk about uncomfortable ideas, and to raise these issues is, as I see it, to examine the nature and purpose of universities and of higher education – the very issue which is implicated in the arguments surrounding the current funding crisis.

So, with that in mind, I'd like to consider a powerful and relevant piece of imagery: the ivory tower.

The view from the Ivory Tower

The expression 'ivory tower', as we know it, comes from an 1837 poem by the French writer Charles Sainte-Beuvre who, writing against the background of the social and political unrest in France

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[8] Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2021/14/contents).
[9] Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024), Press Release (14th March 2024). Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-strengthens-approach-to-counter-extremism.

following the Second French Revolution and the July Monarchy, used the term in comparing the writings – and the attitudes – of the writers Alfred de Vigny and Victor Hugo. Sainte-Beuvre, himself a republican, used the expression *tout d'Ivoire* to disparage the writing, and the politics, of Vigny, who was more sympathetic to the cause of constitutional monarchy.

> Rivals, without hearing it, ran there full of flame;
> [...]
> Hugo powerful and strong, Vigny careful and fine,
> Of an unequal destiny, but none of them in vain,
> Attempted great success and disputed the empire.
> [...]
>   Hugo, tough supporter
> [...]
>   fought under armour,
> And held high his banner amidst the murmur:
> He keeps it again; and Vigny, more secretive,
> As in his ivory tower, before noon, retired.[10]

In Saint-Beuvre's accusatory sense the metaphorical ivory tower was a retreat: an escape, a place to flee from the practical – and, for Sainte-Beuvre, political – issues of the day into a realm of meticulous, scholarly, and 'safe' concern. It's clear that Sainte-Beuvre admonishes de Vigny here: his attitudes and concerns are lesser, and his scholarly approach unworthy, cowardly even in its disregard for the real, practical, concerns of the day. The disengaged, academic, attitude of the *tout d'Ivoire* is lesser because it does not take a vested political stance.

This image has stuck. And, of course, since then, the accusation of ivory tower attitudes or thinking has been deployed often enough to denigrate academic work that did not fit political agenda. Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century – Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, and Maoist China above all, saw the idea of disinterested scholarship that didn't defer to political ends as a notable obstacle, and acted with little hesitation to suppress or eradicate it.

There is another, earlier, source of the expression ivory tower. The phrase occurs in the *Song of Songs* (7:4) in the Old Testament, where it appears poetically as a reference to purity and beauty; and within the Christian tradition the term is a common epithet for the Virgin Mary, and used to symbolize purity and divinity, and as a model of the beauty of faith and divine grace.

At around the same time that Sainte-Beuvre deployed the phrase to criticize his political rivals as cowards hiding from the concerns of the world, the English Catholic theologian and academic,

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[10] Sainte-Beuvre, C. (1837) *À M. Villemain*, from *Pensées d'août*.

Cardinal John Henry Newman elaborated on the use of the expression ivory tower in the Christian tradition as applied to the Virgin Mary. 'A tower,' he remarked, 'is a fabric which rises higher and more conspicuous than other objects in its neighbourhood.'[11] And such it was that Mary, who *stood* by the Cross, towered above the Apostles, who were overcome with their grief, 'slept in sorrow', fled, and even denied their faith. Mary – the *Turris Eburnea* – then, appears as an image of strength – of faith in a greater purpose; a figure who although subjected to the same earthly pressures and torments, perhaps even – as we might assume of Mary at the Cross – feeling them even more keenly, is not lost in the mundane, but retains faith in, and derives strength from, an image, and purpose, that stands above it. Understood in this way the ivory tower, far from timidity and cowardice, represents strength, fortitude, and resilience. But it is also a guide, an example. An example perhaps of how to endure suffering, but more generally how to approach and engage with the concerns of everyday life, and those practical and indeed political issues that Sainte-Beuvre was so eager to accuse those whose attitudes he disliked of ignoring and retreating from.

What bearing do these images have for universities and their conditions in the 21st century? Firstly, I think it's important to point out just how far from the truth the popular – pejorative – ivory tower metaphor is. It's certainly true to say that universities are explicitly intellectual institutions, and it's also true enough that for most of their history universities have served a small section of the population and so may, in absolute numerical terms, be considered elite describe them as elite, and perhaps rarefied, institutions. But this does not mean that universities have ever been – at least not wholly – detached, unconcerned, and in practical terms *irrelevant* institutions. The truth is that universities have never been truly 'detached'. This, I think, is readily apparent when we consider their historical development. Even when they were explicitly religious institutions, the mediaeval universities, including what became the Oxbridge colleges were, in distinct contrast to the other major institutions of learning – the monasteries – institutions of teaching; comparatively open – admittedly with some significant limitations – and dedicated to spreading knowledge rather than cloister it. Moreover, for all their exclusivity, the mediaeval universities were overwhelmingly outward-looking institutions. They were, even in comparison to our institutions today, to borrow a phrase from our own university's branding, 'professions-facing': along with Divinity, it was Law and Medicine that dominated university studies. Disciplines and occupations with committed outward focus and social purpose.

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[11] Newman, J.H. (1907) 'Turris Eburnea (The Ivory Tower) in *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman (I)* (ed. Rev. W.P. Neville); pp.60-61. *The Newman Reader*. Available: https://www.newmanreader.org/works/meditations/index.html.

When university curricula started to grow, and liberal arts became a central element, this centred not on what today might be thought of as 'liberal arts' today, but on Mathematics, Logic, and Rhetoric – broad and highly transferable skills. In fact, if we were again to borrow from 21st century language, we would have to concede these subjects and skills to be amongst the most employable on offer in most degree programmes.

By the time modern universities emerged and universities multiplied and broadened their scope drastically in the latter half of the 19th century, universities (particularly, in the UK, Durham, London, Manchester, and Newcastle) set out particularly not only to embrace newer disciplines, connected with the social evolution of the world around them, but also to be significant cultural and economic actors within their regional geographies.[12]

Far from being disconnected, universities are, and have always been embedded within society, with considerable outward-looking focus, sensitive to, if not necessarily agreeing with, changes around them.[13] As Kivinen and Poikus, in their survey of university charters from the 13th century, have pointed out, since their inception, 'functional relations of exchange with surrounding communities have always been a vital necessity for the entire university institution, whether with spiritual or secular, as well as local and national communities.'[14] Importantly, it is not a consequence of the civic university mission that this is the case, rather it is essential to the nature of universities as *social institutions* that they are embedded within and interdependent with the broader fabric of society.

Nevertheless, there is, I think, some important merit in the ivory tower metaphor. Not as a description of what universities in fact are like, but because it presents an image of the university as a particular kind of institution, defined by a particular kind of attitude, a particular strength, and a particular sense of purpose that is distinct from those of other social institutions, and according to which universities can indeed be seen to stand out – to *tower* over – the mundane. It is this sense of a particular and distinct purpose which it seems higher education in the UK has either lost sight of, or resolutely turned against; and it seems to me that it is this lack of clear sense of particular and guiding purpose that it responsible, at least in part, for the current sense of crisis that haunts universities.

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[12] Dimitriou, M. (2023) 'The University in the United Kingdom in the 19th Century), *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 4(1): 119-125.

[13] If there is any truth to the claim that universities are home to studies or attitudes that might rightly be described as unconcerned with the world outside – what I would call merely self-indulgent studies – then it is a recent deviation correlated not with a narrow and exclusive university system but a sprawling and expansive one.

[14] Kivinen, O. and Poikus, P. (2006) 'Privileges of *Universitas Magistrorum et Scolarium* and their justification in charters of foundation from the 13th to the 21st centuries', *Higher Education* 52: 185-213; p.188.

The nature and purpose of universities

There are plenty of ways that the purpose of universities could be approached, and any number of authoritative figures whose arguments can be drawn on. I'm going to draw here on the ideas of two thinkers who, to my mind, stand out as particularly insightful: the Prussian statesman and polymath, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the British philosopher and educationalist, Alfred North Whitehead. Before I turn to these two quite remarkable figures and their ideas for universities however, I want to briefly consider the etymology of the word 'university' itself.

The term university derives from the Latin word *universitas*, which itself comes from *universus* – the Latin form of universe – meaning, of course, the whole, the totality, or aggregate. In the sense of academic institution, university is a shortening of the phrase *Universitas Magistrorum et Scolarium*, or the whole, or, more colloquially, the community of teachers and scholars, which came to describe the late mediaeval universities in the late 14th century. The term *universitas* was already in broad use to denote recognized organizations – corporations – that enjoyed special status and entitlements, and its use in the academic sense then describes a body corporate encompassing the whole of learned academic endeavours, and the academic and student bodies. While the origins of the modern academy lie in the professional scholarly guilds – the original form of learned societies – the universities, as institutions, were different because they united both the activities of a range of learned scholars in the 'universe of knowledge' – an expansive curriculum, or a range of disciplines, as we might understand them now – and the teaching of students. That such institutions were understood to be *communities* is also telling. While there is no shortage of debate about the definition and meaning of the term community, it is, to my mind at least, impossible to do justice to the idea of community without resting it ultimately on a shared set of collective values and purpose – community, in other words, is a moral endeavour. The question then becomes what are the shared values and purposes that give meaning to the moral community that defines universities?

It is this unique nature of universities and their social importance that characterized the thinking of the man who not only oversaw the building of one of the great modern universities, but also set the foundations for the institution of the modern research university – Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Wilhelm von Humboldt

In 1809, Humboldt set out his vision for the higher education institutions of Berlin, and thereby provided the ideological and practical blueprint for the modern research university. At the heart of Humboldt's vision is the conviction that universities are neither technical committees or engines of

knowledge production, and nor are they educational institutions in the manner of schools, where learning follows fixed curricula and where information is essentially imparted from teachers to students. They are, quite uniquely, knowledge-producing institutions of education. As institutions, universities are first and foremost a community – a community of teachers and scholars – united by their shared dedicated to the pursuit of science (knowledge and learning). It is this common value system, and their dedicated practice of it, that binds them as a community – and a community that is entitled to special privileges – is that they are united first and foremost to the pursuit of knowledge.

Humboldt's image was of a truly 'higher' education that was concerned not simply with the mastery of relevant knowledge, but of the realization of individual possibility. An education in which what he understood to be the development of moral character could take place. Humboldt understood higher education as *Bildung*. Like many a German concept, this is difficult to carry over into English. Briefly, *Bildung* describes education aimed not only to instil a broad range of knowledge, but also those inner attitudes and faculties that build a moral character: critical autonomy, moral principles, civic duty, etc. that make people good citizens.[15] It is often taken to mean ethical or cultural development; it concerned with learning to understand one's social world, its history, and one's place within it.[16] Education in the tradition of *Bildung* is less about learning a series of things as it is learning how to acquire and appreciate information, evaluate it, and have the wisdom and mindset to use it well. Those with a literary mind might be reminded of the *Bildungsroman* – the style of romantic novel in which the protagonist undergoes an often great and perilous moral journey – arriving, hopefully, at a realization of the nature of the world and of themselves.

It is because universities, by uniting the search for, and the creation of, knowledge with the whole education – the *Bildung* – of citizens, that universities, for Humboldt, were 'the pinnacle in which everything that happens directly for the moral culture of the nation comes together'.[17]

This image of *Bildung*, the developmental education, was a central aspect of Humboldt's thinking. But education of this kind was not a given; it is not a pedagogy, a technology for lesson planning, or a learning outcome. It is a particular kind of philosophy – a sociology, perhaps – and it is the product of action and context. It required certain characteristics on the part of universities.

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[15] The German poet Schiller, for instance, allied this strongly with the development of an aesthetic sensibility (see Schiller, J.C.F., 2004, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, New York: Dover Publications).
[16] For instance, in Hegel (2008, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* [trans. T.M.Knox, ed. S.Houlgate], Oxford: OUP; e.g. pp.159, 184-186).
[17] Humboldt, W. (1809/10) *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin*; p.229.

Humboldt's vision of the university was built on the independence of universities from the control, or interference of other social bodies – particularly the state, but also religious censorship and the pressure of public opinion. The nature of universities rested in their autonomy. Particularly, in the autonomy of teaching and learning (*Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*). The freedom of teaching (*Lehrfreiheit*) is close enough to what we think of as academic freedom: the idea that academics should be free to carry out their scholarly activities – their teaching and research – as dictated by the demands of their own conscience and their scholarship. But this is paralleled by the freedom on the part of students, who make up the other half of the aggregate community of teachers and scholars. *Lernfreiheit* implies the freedom of students to choose their studies, to pursue their own individual *Bildung* within the universe of knowledge provided by the university – and to do so in a free and open environment, unhindered by others. In other words, what we might call an autonomous education. Indeed, autonomy – of teaching and research, of learning, and of universities themselves as institutions – is inseparable from Humboldt's vision.

It is perhaps easy to mistakenly see this as an argument for cloistered detachment, but this is not at all what Humboldt argued for. Humboldt is not suggesting that university ought to have nothing to do with the outside world or to avoid being significant actors in the political landscape; rather, autonomy is necessary in order that universities can fulfil their role as educational and knowledge-producing institutions that enable and inspire *Bildung*.

He argued:

> The state must not demand from them [universities] anything that relates directly and straightforwardly to itself, but must cherish the inner conviction that when they achieve their final purpose, they will also fulfil its purposes, and from a much more elevated perspective, one from which much more can be brought together and very different forces and levers can be applied than the state is capable of setting in motion.[18]

This is a clear argument for academic freedom and against the instrumental approach to scientific knowledge, but with an outward social purpose. Universities must be autonomous in order to fulfil their ultimate purpose of developing moral character through the appreciation and dedication to science – to knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge itself. To paraphrase – only knowledge that is self-motivated can shape character.

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[18] *Ibid.*; p.234.

Alfred North Whitehead

A related view is found in the writings of the British mathematician, philosopher, and educationalist Alfred North Whitehead. For Whitehead, the connection between research and teaching was also central to the nature and purpose of universities. 'Education,' he suggested, 'is discipline for the adventure of life; research is intellectual adventure; and the universities should be homes of adventure shared in common by young and old.'[19]

Whitehead saw education – and learning in general – as following a rhythm: through which information was approached first with novelty, then precision, and then with generalization. The dominant spirit of the university, he argued, should be that of generalization: 'During the school period the student has been mentally bending over his desk; at the University he should stand up and look around.'[20] Finding new ways to apply and to use the knowledge that has been painstakingly acquired. Beyond the acquisition of facts, which makes up the bedrock of all learning, it is imagination that characterizes education. The crucial character of universities is that they promote 'the imaginative acquisition of knowledge'.

'The justification for a university,' Whitehead argued, '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. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least this is the function which it should perform for society.'[21]

Like Humboldt, and equally compatible with our more contemporary view of universities as related to both employment and citizenship, Whitehead sees higher education as a special kind of training – or perhaps better a preparation – for the requirements of life in modern society. We might think of it as the cultivation of imagination, or of imaginative thinking. Again, like Humboldt, this is not a matter simply of pedagogy, or of course content, but about the circumstances in which learning takes place and how ideas are taught and valued. Whitehead particularly objected against what he called 'inert ideas', which he described as 'ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilised, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations.'[22] Such ideas were not only useless, but educationally harmful, as they actively stultified the imagination.

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[19] Whitehead, A.N. (1929c) 'The Universities and Their Function' in *The Aims of Education and other essays*, New York: The Free Press; p.98.

[20] Whitehead, A.N. (1929b) 'The Rhythm of Education' in *The Aims of Education and other essays*, New York: The Free Press; p.26.

[21] Whitehead, *op cit.* (1929c); p.93.

[22] Whitehead, A.N. (1929a) 'The Aims of Education' in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, New York: The Free Press; p.1.

For Whitehead, imagination – the imaginative acquisition of knowledge – depends upon autonomy just as much as Humboldt's *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*. Quite particularly, the importance of not having to be concerned with specific practical ends. This is not to say that practical consequences ought not to play a part in imaginative thinking – far from it, in fact. Whitehead is absolutely committed to the idea that education is, and ought to be *useful*, but that no specific ends, and no responsibility for taking action, be required. He writes:

> The initial discipline of imagination in its period of youthful vigour requires that there be no responsibility for immediate action. The habit of unbiased thought … cannot be acquired when there is the daily task of preserving a concrete organisation. You must be free to think rightly and wrongly, and free to appreciate the variousness of the universe undisturbed by its perils.[23]

Knowledge, and education, is useful not because it provides a blueprint for achieving certain aims, but because of the capacity to apply reason in addressing issues and solving problems in general: 'It is useful,' therefore, 'because understanding is useful'.[24] If it is to be supported, the freedom for imagination to explore ideas unimpeded is necessary if imagination learning is to be truly imaginative.

It's worth noting that in his essay *Universities and their Function*, Whitehead specifically uses the example of business schools to demonstrate the relevance of imaginative learning for society. Imagination, he suggests, is necessary to make business decisions, balance competing interests, and to accumulate and understand the broad range of factors influencing decisions and their consequences. 'Education,' he argued, 'is the acquisition of the art of the utilisation of knowledge.'[25]The very last thing that education in applied fields should be, is devoid of the kind of imagination he advocates. Fostering this kind of imaginative approach in students who will go on to work in applied fields, therefore, is an absolutely crucial function of universities.

The particular character of universities

Both Humboldt and Whitehead provide accounts – visions, in fact – of universities that I think have great significance in terms of pedagogy, curricula, and university administration. But alongside – or

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[23] Whitehead, *op cit*. (1929c); p.93.
[24] Whitehead, *op cit*. (1929a); p.2.
[25] *Ibid.*; p.4.

rather, towering over – these concerns, is a powerful image of what universities are and what they are for. For both Humboldt and Whitehead, universities, as institutions, are quite particular places. They are places characterized by the combination of freedoms of scholarship: of teaching, research, and learning, both for academics and students, coming together, where the experience and wisdom of academics is combined with the 'zest of life'. Universities are home to the community of scholars – teachers and students – united by their shared dedication to the pursuit of knowledge, and are places in which knowledge is shared, re-examined, revitalized through innovative and imaginative engagement with the aim of facilitating the development of learned, but also creative and moral, character – the imaginative acquisition of knowledge as a project of *Bildung*, with the ultimate purpose of shaping people able to engage with and contribute to society.

They can do this only when learning is autonomous. Self-directed, certainly, but also carried out in an environment that is open and unhindered, and where the universe of knowledge is available for independent exploration. The pursuit of learning must not be driven by, or subordinated to, the achievement of external, practical, ends – to specific political, social, or economic goals – but open, undertaken for its own sake, for the intrinsic value of nurturing understanding and imagination, for only then is it aligned with its social purpose and capable of *being most useful and relevant*.

Their particular character is dependent on the fact that universities are dedicated to these ideas in a way that other institutions simply cannot be. No other social institution can put the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake above other demands and operate without the pressures to be (politically) relevant, to be 'practical', or to be profitable. Even those that do carry produce knowledge and/or educate. A government policy unit must be dedicated, above all, to knowledge that can lead to practical policy; a think tank, to knowledge that can further the political objectives of a party; a school must pursue education that follows established curricula; a learned society must defend the interests of its particular discipline; a trade union its members or industry. In the world of private enterprise, where much cutting-edge research is carried out, this is still done in service to profit and expanding the economic influence of the company. I don't mean to suggest that nothing good comes of any of this, or that any of these of these organization and their endeavours are somehow lesser, or inherently sinful, only that they are *different*, and that if, as Humboldt and Whitehead see it, that the autonomous dedication to imaginative learning is indeed important, then it cannot be achieved under any of these conditions.

Universities, because they can be dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, might well be thought of as states of exception. Places where the normal practices, or social rules, at least as they relate to the pursuit of knowledge, simply do not, and should not, apply. Perhaps above all, this

is true for the value of ideas, arguments, approaches, or topics, which, while they may be thought of in some fields or contexts as unacceptable or undesirable, are a necessary, and indeed definitive part of the character, purpose, and social importance of universities.

This of course does not imply that universities ought to pretend that such practical concerns are unimportant or are of no consequence to universities. Universities, like all institutions of society are subject to the tides of political opinion and economic change and must ride these waves lest they be dashed on the rocks; and must continue to operate in ways that keep pace with the requirements of the contemporary world. But that does not at all mean that they must let these things dictate their operation of their function, for their function – their purpose – is what makes them socially valuable in the first place, and it is from this that their practical importance and their economic value derives. In part this is because of the particular mindset, or approach to learning, and to knowledge, that is implied by the autonomous nature of universities: what we might call the 'academic spirit'.

The academic spirit, is, quite simply, the attitude that parallels and is conducive to the image of universities already outlined. It is commitment to the shared values of the scholarly community: a commitment to the value and pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and for the freedoms of scholarly inquiry that make that possible. To approach something in the academic spirit, then, is to approach it in an open, disinterested way: free from specific external objectives – such as profit, or personal gain, or political objectives – and motivated primarily by the pursuit of knowledge itself and for its own sake.

How can *Bildung* be achieved, imaginative learning take place, if students are never allowed to explore uncomfortable ideas – to be uncomfortable; to challenge – and be challenged. In the *Bildungsroman*, it is the unsettling encounters, the challenges, the uncomfortable ordeals, that provide the means for moral growth. What then, is the state of exception for universities for if it does not provide for, and protect, and enshrine the crucial importance of uncomfortable ideas as fundamental to the character and the purposes of universities? What could the freedoms of teaching and, crucially, of learning, possibly mean if not that academics and students be allowed – and indeed encouraged – to explore knowledge as their inclination drives them, even when it may be uncomfortable; to pursue knowledge imaginatively; to stray from the familiar? An education, and an educational institution, cannot be considered autonomous if limits are set to the universe of knowledge and its exploration, whether by the interests of governments, the sensibilities of religion, popular prejudice, or the gossamer morality of cultural movements.

Uncomfortable ideas, then, are inseparable from the character of universities as places – perhaps exceptional places – defined by the shared commitment of the community toward autonomous, open inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. They are not stultified, or rendered incapable by uncomfortable ideas, for it is the freedom of inquiry that permits and depends on uncomfortable ideas that sustains them. Within such an environment there is no threat from uncomfortable ideas because they can be understood and engaged with in an academic sense. Pursued, questioned, criticized, but above all, engaged with, because they can be raised free from the demands that they be applied, be justified by their instrumental value, or be viewed through invested, partisan, political lenses, rather than disinterestedly, academically, on their own terms. They provide, then, an intellectual – we might, following Whitehead, say imaginative – testing area, where ideas can be opened up, explored, criticized, and subsequently retired or developed, depending on how well they stand up to scrutiny.

The image of universities we can take from Humboldt and Whitehead, that emphasizes imagination, autonomy, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – what I've said here involve embracing uncomfortable ideas and suggests universities as a state of exception – is, as I've mentioned, not just an argument for how universities are, or ought to be – the character of universities. It is, quite fundamentally, an argument for the social purpose of universities.

Humboldt and Whitehead are clear that universities and their unique and particular character are important because of the function they perform for society. Because they are both key producers of knowledge and the producers of the educated classes of the future, universities are cultural trailblazers. What happens in universities sets an example for other institutions and organizations and shapes the attitudes and outlooks of the graduates who will, in turn, shape society in the future. In this sense, there is a powerful affinity between the autonomous character of universities and the 'academic spirit' which they foster and upon which they depend, and the societies within which universities are embedded.

Universities, the open society, and the need for uncomfortable ideas

This relationship between the activities of academic inquiry and the wider social context is, I think, elegantly described by the Austrian-British philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper, when he wrote about the Open Society.[26]

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[26] Popper, K.R. (2007) *The Open Society and its Enemies (2 Vols),* Abingdon: Routledge.

Popper is probably best known for his argument that science operates on a principle of *falsifiability*: that science is characterized and advanced by the practice of offering up ideas about the world that can be subjected to empirical scrutiny – they can be tested in an effort to prove them wrong.[27] Successful ideas are accepted as long as they continue to withstand scrutiny and criticism. In fact, Popper held that this process of science was essentially no different to the development of knowledge in general, a process he described generally as conjecture and refutation, and what we think of more colloquially – and Popper made this point himself – as trial and error.[28]

Central to Popper's understanding of the advancement of science is the idea of fallibilism. Quite simply, the inescapable truth that no matter how advanced our scientific thinking is, it remains possible that it can be wrong – it can be *falsified*. There is a crucial modesty in the position Popper advocates. As we, and our knowledge, are inherently fallible, no individual can have the authority to 'establish truth by decree'.[29] Acknowledging that everything we know is limited and could, in principle, be falsified, means we must seriously entertain the fact that a person with whom we disagree may well have access to knowledge that we do not, and so may well have important information to offer that might falsify our own claims, or at least cause us to adjust our thinking. This system of conjectures and refutations and its associated fallibilism is, for Popper, the basis not only of the pursuit of scientific knowledge, but of life in general in open, liberal democracies. It is the principle on which free association, all forms of exchange, and certainly the mechanisms of democratic government are based.[30] The simple acceptance of the limits of our own knowledge in relation to the world and our interactions with others, and thus the need for openness to alternatives, to the need for negotiation and compromise, and, above all, to criticism, and having our mistakes pointed out.

A crucial role of universities in the production of knowledge, then, is not just that they provide an open forum for exploring new and perhaps uncomfortable ideas, for *Bildung*, but that they also foster the open and modest mindset of scrutiny and critical thinking, which exists in a rarefied and formalized manner in the academic spirit, but which – following Whitehead – exists in a more generalized form, in the character that is produced through exposure to these environments and of *Bildung*. The development of character of which Humboldt spoke, and the powerful admixture that Whitehead saw as the key essence of universities, is crucially related to the openness to

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[27] Popper, K.R. (2002a) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Abingdon: Routledge.

[28] Popper, K.R. (2002b) 'Science: Conjecture and Refutation' in *Conjectures and Refutations*, Abingdon: Routledge: 43-86.

[29] Popper, K.R. (2002c) 'Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance' in *Conjectures and Refutations*, Abingdon: Routledge; p.39

[30] A related argument is made by Hayek (2006, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Abingdon: Routledge).

uncomfortable ideas that is part of the system of conjecture and refutation that is itself a necessary consequence of the fallibilistic understanding of the production of knowledge and the development of civil life.

It is, then, civil life itself, and not just formal science, that develops from conjectures and refutations and the openness to criticism and what I'm broadly describing here as uncomfortable ideas. Not only do universities provide unique places for this practice – a practice which, as I have suggested, is not so openly and comprehensively sustained in other institutions that are not able to retain open, critical, and detached engagement with knowledge for its own sake – but they are also unique in instilling the value of this outlook and developing the capacity for its practice in students. What more is the ultimate objective of *Bildung* than the training of mind and character to be open, modest, critical students of knowledge and competent moral citizens capable of encountering and dealing with uncomfortable ideas?

In this sense, universities may, I think, quite rightly be viewed as ivory towers – that is, as *Turres Eburneae*. They represent, like Mary at the Cross, an example of how to engage with the world, particularly with what is difficult – or uncomfortable – to encounter. They provide a meaningful and essential example of the fundamental values of a society that recognizes an open, critical environment for inquiry, and an equally open, tolerant, and modest approach to knowledge and fellow citizens. Perhaps most significantly, they represent a way with which to approach and engage with uncomfortable ideas.

This, I think, is firm enough ground to see universities as particular institutions – states of exception – with enormous social and cultural value, and for this alone the image of the universities as *Turres Eburneae* is something positive that should be defended. But an equal virtue of uncomfortable ideas, and for universities which explore them, is that for all their exceptionality universities have never been truly separate, and academia's greatest impacts are actually direct consequences of its detachment.

The virtue of uncomfortable ideas

I've made a case for universities as places of exception when it comes to uncomfortable ideas and that this is a fundamental part of the nature of universities as social institutions as places where the practical concerns that direct and dominate other institutions and areas of practice are secondary to the virtue of curiosity, of unbounded critical exploration, and of knowledge as an end-in-itself. But I

also want to reiterate the point that this is in no sense a retreat from the messy reality of the practical world. Rather, it is a fervent and crucial engagement with it.

It has long been recognized not only that many of the scientific breakthroughs with the most enormous practical significance are the result of disinterested and speculative investigation,[31] but that they are also the result of the combination and contestation of ideas. The fallibilism at the root of Popper's understanding of the process of knowledge production and open societies reminds us to be modest, and that as individuals we are limited and we require other people to scrutinize our ideas in order for us to improve our knowledge. It is an inevitably corollary of recognizing our own limitations that we appreciate the contributions that others can make, and the strength that there is in collaboration.[32]

Humboldt recognized the strength and virtue of universities being in part because of the 'universe' of knowledge that they could sustain; not reduced to narrow, practical fields, but open to a variety of explorations, encounters, and critiques.

> the intellectual work within humanity flourishes only as cooperation … not merely in that one fills in what another lack, but in that the successful work of one inspires the others … the internal organization of these institutions [universities] must bring forth and sustain a collaboration that uninterrupted, constantly self-renewing, but unforced and without specific purpose.[33]

Whitehead, likewise, although he made it clear that without specialization there could be no true learning, advocated the broad and imaginative encounter with a variety of ideas in order to create the character of mind he saw universities pursuing. The open, blue-sky thinking that universities sustain is tied to very real and practical concerns of interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and the power of out-of-the-box thinking for novel and innovative answers to very real and intractable problems. Uncomfortable ideas are very often the most decisive in innovation. Not only because the most practical discoveries are very often the result of open exploration, rather than the narrow and repeated efforts at solving new problems with old tools. But because exploring uncomfortable ideas – having places in which uncomfortable ideas can be explored – creates the kind of open dialogue between people – between students and researchers – that enables them to recognize the inherent limitations of their own practices, and the advantages and potentials inherent in those of others.

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[31] See, for instance, Flexner, A. (1939) 'The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge' *Harper's Magazine*, 179, June/November 1939. Available: https://www.ias.edu/sites/default/files/library/UsefulnessHarpers.pdf.
[32] See Johnson, S. (2011) *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Seven Patterns of Innovation*, London: Penguin.
[33] Humboldt, *op cit.*; pp.229-230.

In particular, this open and collaborative dialogue invites the unusual combinations of ideas from different fields. Uncomfortable ideas, very often, are seen as such because they challenge, or sit outside, the typical orthodoxy of disciplinary thought. Exploring them, therefore, creates new spaces for knowledge and imagination by inviting speculation and argument that comes from other perspectives and disciplines. This is increasingly recognized across a range of subject areas and in fields of practice (including much private enterprise). It is recognized particularly as an increasingly significant part of the creative and knowledge-economy, where the insights from people with different specialisms and perspectives – most notably those from broadly artistic, creative, perspectives – introduce significantly different ways of thinking and working that, while they may be artistic in spirit, are of enormous practical importance in engineering, manufacturing, and various other applied fields. There is, I think, very little space between fostering the kind of environment that encourages encountering, playing with, and critiquing uncomfortable ideas, and providing space for and encouraging the disinterested spirit of academic inquiry, and the kind of open, interdisciplinary, collaborative and experimental thinking and working which is so often at the forefront of knowledge production and innovation in real-world application.

Conclusion: in praise of uncomfortable ideas

I began with the imagery of the ivory tower, and I've drawn on this metaphor to establish a case for why universities are particular kinds of institutions that depend on their ability to provide autonomous and open spaces for the pursuit of knowledge. I'm conscious, however, that this leaves the door open to charges of foolish yearning for some long-lost golden age of academia[34] as some whimsical space of unencumbered intellectual meandering. I am absolutely not making an argument of this kind. Firstly, because, as I've said, that image of the ivory tower has never accurately represented reality, and any such imagined golden age is equally fictitious. Secondly, because the autonomy and exceptional space of universities – for which I *am* arguing – is important not simply because knowledge for the sake of knowledge is a valuable end-in-itself (although it is), but because of what the existence of such institutions means for society. Popper was quite certain that the pursuit of knowledge he advocated was not only the result of an open society but also necessary to its continuation: without the attitudes fostered by open and critical inquiry, the attitudes and values necessary for open societies – liberal, democratic, tolerant, rational, and just societies – would not be sustained. *Bildung*, for Humbolt, was the education needed for good citizens; imaginative

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[34] Cunliffe, P. (2016) 'Between Golden Ageism and Prometheanism' in C. Hudson and J. Williams (eds.) *Why Academic Freedom Matters: A response to current challenges*, London: Civitas: 38-48.

learning, for Whitehead, was the means of producing the intelligent and imaginative generations needed to contend with the challenges of future society.

Indeed, as Doug Stokes has put it recently, universities are perhaps the most important cultural institutions because of their role in shaping young minds and thus the attitudes that shape the society of tomorrow.[35] When universities have lost that sense of purpose which sees them as particular, and exceptional spaces, where enquiry can move openly, unhindered by the everyday demands for utility, for profit, for political capital, for social acceptance, then rather than guiding, and offering a source of strength that comes from faith in a higher purpose, they risk reinforcing, and perpetuating, not only uninspiring ideas and sloppy thinking, but small, feeble, and narrow-minded attitudes that will form the intellectual and moral fabric of future society.

Consequently, he is quite right to argue that:

> academic freedom and open enquiry are central to the advance of human civilization: they are foundational values that allow contestation of the always contingent and fallible sum of human knowledge that is itself an iterative process of understanding.[36]

For one final thought, I shall return to Cardinal Newman, who, at the height of his intellectual work and influence – and at a time when religious orthodoxy and sectarian argument in and about universities was topical – wrote a book entitled *The Idea of a University*. This book contains much that is of value in thinking about the purpose of education, the content of education, the balance between science and humanities, the role of reason and faith, and the importance of temperance and tolerance. In the book, Newman describes the particular virtue of universities owing to the breadth of knowledge studied and researched in universities, allowing students to encounter ideas well outside their own chosen subjects, and so to acquire knowledge not in narrow isolation, but as interconnected, and so as part of a whole, general approach and attitude to knowledge, learning, and life.

He describes universities as:

> An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to

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[35] Stokes, D. (2023) *Against Decolonisation: Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West*, Cambridge: Polity; p.136.
[36] *Ibid*. pp.86-87.

aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes … He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides him in his choice of subjects, and duly interprets for him those which he chooses. He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. … A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.[37]

Now you will almost certainly seek in vain to find suggestions of this noble mission, and these admirable attributes, in university marketing materials, in programme handbooks, or quality assurance paperwork. They are not usual topics for discussion at programme boards, and nor do they feature in external examiners' reports, or module feedback surveys. They are not asked about in the NSS, they are not covered by the TEF, and they imply nothing that might be submittable to the REF. Yet, I would argue, they capture more of what a university as an institution is and does – or perhaps *should be* and *should do* – than is captured by any of those metrics. Perhaps ironically, although it might be even less plausibly measured, I also think that this is a far better description of the 'impact' of universities and scholarship than that suggested by the REF.

As institutions with a unique and powerful role in society, it should be a greater priority for universities that, in their operations and structures, they create and defend the environment of freedom of inquiry that engenders precisely this kind of 'habit of mind', this disposition, and this attitude to learning, knowledge, and its value for the development of moral character. For it is by representing such an environment that they uphold, promote, and act as a moral exemplar of the values of lifelong learning, of intellectual rigour, of openness, freedom, wisdom, that are the educational and intellectual pillars of open, innovative, critical, tolerant, liberal societies.

And it is in this spirit, and, indeed, in service of these goals that we should praise uncomfortable ideas and the abilities of universities to provide the spaces and the atmospheres in which they can be encountered and engaged with. And this is very much our hope for this group: an opportunity to support the intellectual tradition from which universities grew, to profit from the interests and specialisms of others, to gain a better understanding of our own areas of interest in relation to other disciplines ideas, and arguments which we might otherwise be unlikely to encounter, and to help develop that habit of mind that is produced in open, critical, honest engagement with interesting, speculative, and *uncomfortable* ideas.

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[37] Newman, J.H. (2001) *The Idea of a University*; p.101.