

How to defend universities

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Stefan Collini

WHAT ARE UNIVERSITIES FOR?

A contemporary manifesto in defence of our universities

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Tom Tower, Christ Church, Oxford

From October to December of last year, Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig, teachers of a Stanford University class called “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence”, put their course online as an experiment, making enrolment available free to anyone in the world who might be interested. The experiment was startlingly successful, attracting some 160,000 students. There were more from Lithuania alone than there are in the entire student body at Stanford. Students from Afghanistan braved war conditions to send in their coursework assignments from internet cafés. Of the 248 students who scored top marks not one was from Stanford. The physical class dwindled from 300 students to thirty because the participants preferred the online version. Thrun has resigned his tenure at Stanford to found an online university (Norvig is already Director of Research at Google). Along with ventures like the Khan Academy, whose videos of courses on subjects as diverse as algebra and art history have been downloaded more than a hundred million times, Thrun is reinventing the university in a way unimaginable

twenty years ago.

It is not hard to see that information technology and the internet are already challenging universities to consider whether there is anything essential about physical presence in an educational institution. The challenge is as great to research as to teaching, and as disturbing to the humanities as to the sciences. There are a good many paintings that you can view online more intimately than you can see them in the crowded conditions of the museum where they hang (granted, you can’t smell them – yet). The library resources now available to anyone with an internet connection already seem a cornucopia compared with those enjoyed by students and scholars two decades ago, when at even a wellendowed university you had to cycle to the library and call up everything you needed from the stacks. And if, for the price of a DVD, you can soon count on watching the world’s most gifted lecturers develop ideas with the aid of multimedia resources orchestrated by highly creative designers and filmmakers, what will it really be worth to you to sit in the back of a lecture hall to catch those same people live, teaching courses whose support facilities and exams are entirely administered by assistants? Will it become a form of entertainment, like live concerts by a favourite band?

Developments such as these may be the greatest threat the traditional university has ever faced, but they are not discussed in Stefan Collini’s new book, which does not mention computers or the internet. It sees

the threat to universities as coming from a quite different direction, namely from politicians who demand that universities demonstrate their “relevance”, and from obsequious academic administrators who try to gratify them since their funding comes almost entirely from that quarter. This gives the book a definitely British focus, as well as a major blind spot – rather as if a book entitled “What is sport for?” were to draw its examples disproportionately from cricket and omit to mention television. The book also says rather little about international exchanges between universities, the scale of which has been transformed in recent decades by everything from email to easyJet to the Erasmus Programme, which will reach a cumulative total of 3 million student exchanges this year. (Collini rails often and with reason against global league tables, but that is not the same thing.) This narrow focus is a pity not just for the obvious reasons but also because his central message deserves the attention of a wider range of readers than those he is apparently concerned to address.

Collini has called his book a manifesto, and like all drafters of manifestos, he faces the challenge of inspiring the core members of his party while also seducing the uncommitted. Most manifestos, written on the assumption that no single idea is capable of doing both things, evolve into committee assembled documents that succeed in being neither inspirational nor seductive. One of the great strengths of this charming and, yes, seductive book is its rejection of such defeatism. He insists that a defence of the universities that can inspire their core supporters is also one capable of winning over their hesitant potential allies.

Collini is at his best when attacking the common tendency to justify financial support to universities not in terms of the value of what universities actually do, but instead entirely in terms of the benefits they create for something else, such as economic growth. He speculates wittily about the consequences of submitting “the speeches and articles about universities by politicians, academic administrators, business leaders and others” to a textual experiment consisting of the removal of all references to economic prosperity, growth, competitiveness, wealth creation and so on.

I suspect the resulting texts would resemble those pictures of pre-modern battlefields where small clumps of survivors are left going through the motions of military activity though they have lost contact with the main army and will be fatally vulnerable to the first concerted attack by the enemy. A few nominal values will be left wandering through the scarred and vacant landscapes of these denuded paragraphs . . . but they have no fight left in them and no sense of their place in a larger strategy.

He is scathing about the criterion of “impact” that will take up 20 per cent of the weight in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (and perhaps more in later years). This is not just because many outstanding pieces of research that change the way we think about a particular problem may have no impact at all according to the way this is defined for the exercise. He also fears that it encourages a pervasive culture of lying. Academics, he writes, “feel obliged to speak an alien language. They are constantly having to cobble together statements which purport to demonstrate the contribution their disciplines make to the national economy or to other extraneous goals when they know in their heart of hearts that these are not the purpose of their activities and are not what made these disciplines interesting or valuable to them or others in the first place”. And it deflects attention from the values they should be affirming both to each other and to the outside world: “If we find ourselves saying that what is valuable about learning to play the violin well is that it helps us develop the manual dexterity that will be useful for typing, then we are stuck in a traffic-jam of carts in front of horses”.

Agreeing to affirm the intrinsic values of a university is one thing; agreeing what those values are is quite another. It might be doubted whether there really is anything distinctive that universities are for: students may see them as places to escape their parents, lose their virginity, and make friends for life; parents may see them as places to fit their offspring for financial independence; researchers may see them as places to be paid to do what they want; politicians may see them as places to keep the unemployment figures down; philanthropists may see them as places to be fawned on by the same dons who treated them so

superciliously when they were students. Universities are all of these things and more; are they intrinsically any one thing in particular? In Collini's most impressive chapter, devoted to a sympathetic but not uncritical discussion of John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852), he asserts emphatically that they are. "A university, it may be said, is a protected space in which various forms of useful preparation for life are undertaken in a setting and manner which encourages the students to understand the contingency of any particular packet of knowledge and its interrelations with other different forms of knowledge. To do this, the teachers themselves need to be engaged in constantly going beyond the confines of the packets of knowledge that they teach, and there is no way to prescribe in advance what will and will not be fruitful ways to do that." The claim does not disdain what is useful, and it makes no postmodern put-down of the idea of knowledge, but pleads for flexibility, openness, and space for creative thinking – something anyone who works or studies in a university should be glad to affirm.

Not all of the book is so impressively nuanced, however. It is divided into two halves, the first written as a coherent whole by a Collini apparently more open and flexible than his various avatars who wrote the second, which consists of a number of reprinted occasional pieces on the subject of university finance and reform. Some of these have not held up well since their initial appearance, and most display a polemical energy whose invigorating effect on Collini's prose style does not always compensate for its insidious influence on his logic. A broadside against bibliometry first published in 1989 now looks dated, to put it mildly. And its comparison of the willingness to use citation indices in academic decisions to French collaboration with the Nazis under the Vichy regime should raise an eyebrow in those who recall his earlier lyrical remarks about the value of a "sense of grasp and proportion" in the humanities. "Not everything that counts can be counted" is how the chapter opens, but no sane person could seriously disagree, and what is therefore the rhetorical purpose of the assertion? Not everything that matters is a budget item, either, but are we supposed to conclude that universities should do without budgets?

Bibliometry has come a fair way since 1989 and, contrary to Collini's claims, it does not have to privilege quantity over quality; its real uses should not be discredited by the overblown claims of its more excitable enthusiasts. It has been known in psychology since the work of Paul Meehl in the 1950s that individuals place exaggerated confidence in their own judgements, and that constraining them (in settings such as job interviews or clinical assessments, for instance) to give more weight to systematic criteria and less to overall impressions can lead to reliably better decisions. Academics may want to argue that these research findings are not pertinent to assessments of their own work, but they ought at least to recognize the need for good arguments to that effect, or risk blatant special pleading. All systematic criteria are simplistic, but trusting gut instinct in the absence of systematic criteria is the most simplistic method of all. It may make sense to argue, as Collini does, that "a process of external scrutiny cannot really determine whether any of the members of an academic department are thinking valuable thoughts. In the long run, the answer to that question will be found in the extent to which the thinking of people in the same field turns out to have been significantly influenced and inspired by those thoughts". But he does not explain why it is better to make the assessment in the absence of quantitative evidence about the extent of that influence. Intellectuals may feel insulted at being advised how better to make decisions about the value of their own work. But when the value of that work is being deployed as part of a case for funding from others, "trust us, we know" has lost the persuasive power it had in more deferential times.

We should be grateful to Collini for reminding us of the need to be less defensive in the affirmation of the value of universities; and for expressing his confidence that the reasons academics care about their subjects are the best reasons they can give to others as to why they are worthwhile. But it is a weakness to think that scoring points with the faithful will always persuade the reasonable but uncommitted reader. Collini's rhetorical brio leads him repeatedly to cast those with whom he disagrees as idiots or philistines (and for someone rightly concerned to resist the business world's stereotypes of cloistered and sherry-sipping dons, he refers strangely often to "widget-making" as the canonical activity of people in business). This poses a particular difficulty when he is dealing with one of the more complex issues around which this book

repeatedly turns: whether and how higher education should be considered a “public good”. One reason this is difficult is that the term “public good” is ambiguous. In discussions of higher education it is sometimes used to mean “a good paid for by the public purse”, and sometimes in the more precise economic sense of “a good whose provision benefits everyone whether they have paid for it or not and whether they have had direct access to it or not”. The second sense is often used as a justification for the first, on the model of such obviously public goods as defence. In the United Kingdom (though not in the United States and in some other countries), higher education has traditionally been a public good in the first sense. But it is not a sign of mental deficiency or ideological blindness to question just how much it has been a public good in the second sense. Those who do not go to university may reasonably resent being told that the taxes they pay for this purpose benefit them just as much as they benefit those who do.

That there are broader social benefits from an individual’s university education is undoubted, but a university education is and should be fun for its participants. There is no escaping the fact that it is expensive fun, which in the past everyone has paid for but not everyone has had the chance to enjoy. And when the fun is over, university connections also give graduates much private benefit from privileged access to high-paying jobs. When I taught in the UK, I had many medium-ability students whose eventual lucrative careers in finance owed more to their initial admission to university than to anything I or my colleagues subsequently taught them. Collini’s book will be enjoyed and admired by many embattled academics, but it would have more resonance outside universities if it acknowledged that these were reasonable concerns to raise. References to “the mythical taxpayer” will undoubtedly, and needlessly, annoy some real taxpayers who pay real taxes and wonder why academics should find it amusing to pour scorn on reports of their existence.

The understanding that has persisted historically between universities and the wider public is being renegotiated in many ways. The fact that in England this is happening as a predominantly fiscal and political process should not disguise the fact that it will happen on many other fronts too, and not just technological ones. To take just one dimension, higher education is being feminized at a remarkable rate, with enrolment rates now more than a quarter higher for women than for men in the UK, and striking differences also in the US, France, Spain and Italy (though not, interestingly, in Germany, where there is approximate parity). Men seem to be much less sure than women of the value of a university education. Indeed, in the US, the proportion of men with a university degree is no higher among thirty- to thirty-five-year-olds than it is among sixty-five- to seventy-year-olds, even as the proportion of women with a degree has risen by well over a half. It’s not just politicians who need to be convinced. And, given the heavily male character of political life, there may be a story here about why persuading politicians seems to have become in recent years such an uphill task.

Despite its flaws, Collini’s book is a salutary reminder that universities need to defend the value of what they do in terms of the intrinsic characteristics of these activities, and not in terms of their pay-off for something else. Musicians speak with pride of their music, not of its indirect benefits for GDP, and academics need to speak of their subjects with no less pride. Reading Collini may also help us to answer the question with which I began, even if it is far from being the only question universities need to answer in the coming decades: how much does physical presence really matter when imaginative online courses can enrol students from all over the world? For he reminds us that intellectual enquiry is hard and demands a commitment, one that often needs the close proximity of others similarly engaged. The very ease and flexibility of online communication invites the balkanization of intellectual discourse, as people pick and choose their interlocutors and lazily demonize their opponents under the protection of distance. In contrast to the tribalism of the internet, a university remains one of the few places where you are obliged by physical proximity to engage with your critics under common standards of intelligent and courteous debate. There are certainly other virtues of proximity – the graduation parties are more fun, for a start. But in the face of challenges from technology no less than from the demands of political accountability, this remains a good place to begin the reflection.

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