

Higher education: beyond the bottom line

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ON THE EVENING of 14 April 1912, the Reverend Ernest Carter conducted a religious service aboard a steamship headed for New York. Marion Wright of Somerset, England, who was on her way to get married, sang the final hymn. It was John Henry Newman's 'The Pillar of the Cloud':

Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead
Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead
Thou me on!

These words were eerily prescient. Just as Marion finished singing, the *Titanic* hit an iceberg. Fifteen hundred and seventeen passengers were taken to a watery grave, but not Marion. She made it to America, married and lived to tell the tale.

Universities are currently sailing through their own 'encircling gloom'. Unsure of their purpose, assailed by bureaucrats, economists and politicians, it sometimes seems as if universities are headed for an iceberg of their own. Can the thoughts of Cardinal Newman, dead for more than a century, offer them any navigational advice? On the surface, this may seem a strange question. Apart from provoking a nostalgic sigh from the reactionary members of senior common rooms, Newman's views on the purity of learning for its own sake are hard to reconcile with the predicament facing current universities. Yet, he is quoted in practically every book written about higher

education. What is responsible for his longevity? As I hope to show, the answer to this question is of vital importance, not just for universities but also for the future of Australia.

Let's begin with Newman's ideas and the context in which they were formulated.

Newman's ideas in context

Newman's famous book, *The Idea of a University*,² began with a series of lectures he delivered in Dublin in 1852. For the preceding 150 years, Catholics had been forbidden to study at Trinity College Dublin. The church hierarchy, recently restored in Ireland, wanted to establish an institution of higher learning for Catholics — similar to Notre Dame, which was founded ten years earlier in the United States.³

The Archbishop of Dublin asked John Henry Newman to take on the task. The lectures collected in *The Idea of a University* represent his attempt to justify the idea of a Catholic university to the Dublin community. Justification was necessary because Dubliners held decidedly sceptical views of the proposed university, and of Newman himself. Community leaders distrusted him because he was an Anglican convert, while parents were troubled by Newman's belief that universities should eschew practical employment skills. How would their children support themselves?

Undeterred, Newman attacked the utilitarian view of education, which values a university for its practical products — work-ready graduates, scientific discoveries and ideas for new businesses. He did not deny that these things were useful, but he saw them as secondary. For Newman, the real purpose of a university is to develop 'gentlemen' who 'raise the intellectual tone of society' (women, alas, were not part of his vision).⁴ His new university would abjure practical learning, banish research to special institutes, and allow the Catholic religion to infuse the teaching of all subjects.

Newman claimed that the model for his proposed university was 18th and early 19th century Oxford, but his view of Oxford was highly idealised. In reality, Oxford during that period was profoundly anti-intellectual. Adam Smith, the gentle Scottish genius, described the Oxford colleges of that time as: ‘sanctuaries in which exploded systems and obsolete prejudices found shelter and protection after they had been hunted out of every other corner of the world’.⁵

Oxford was also snobby and exclusive, as was Newman. When he was at Oxford, Newman opposed awarding post-graduate degrees to anyone who was not a member of the Anglican Communion (a stance he doubtless regretted after converting to Catholicism). In practice, the Oxford colleges were little more than ‘finishing schools’ designed to prepare the slow-witted second sons of the aristocracy for a living in the established church.

Not surprisingly, Oxford’s old-style colleges did not provide viable models for 19th century Dublin. Newman managed to get a Catholic university started, but it never flourished. After a few years, it was absorbed into University College. Newman left Ireland and never returned.

Today’s academics share few, if any, of Newman’s values. They do not see religion as central to teaching, they would never banish professional courses, and they are firm in their belief that research is vital to a university. Yet, many academics continue to turn to Newman for advice about the mission and practice of higher education in the 21st century. In his book *What are Universities For?*,⁶ Stefan Collini attributes Newman’s longevity to the persuasive power of his evocative ‘poetry, oratory, and liturgy’. But, it is not only Newman’s prose style that keeps him relevant, it is also his message — his strong defence of liberal education in the age of money.

Education in the age of money

We live in an age in which everything is measured in dollars and cents, including higher education. In contrast to the not-so-distant past, students no longer shop around for the best education their money can buy; they seek the education that will bring them the most money.⁷ Modern universities are happy to go along. Want to make a good living? Have you considered our course on golf course management? How about surfing science? Interested in a trendy profession? No problem; we chase every fad. (Thanks to the popularity of the CSI television series, there are more forensic scientists than there are criminals.)

Newman was one of the first to see the way things were going:

Now this is what some great men are very slow to allow; ... They argue as if every thing, as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind.... With a fundamental principle of this nature, they very naturally go on to ask, what there is to show for the expense of a University; what is the real worth in the market of the article called 'a Liberal Education,' on the supposition that it does not teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures, or to improve our lands, or to better our civil economy; ...⁸

But not even Newman could have guessed just how far such thinking would go. Scientific research, once justified by a desire to understand our world and our place in it, is now judged by its commercial 'impact'. The arts and humanities used to be about the growth of the human spirit. In the age of money, they have become business plans for 'creative industries', which are judged by the size of the profits they produce.

Having accepted that they are marshalling yards for life's gravy train, it is not surprising that universities market their courses by boasting about how much money their graduates

earn. It is not just universities and students that value education in financial terms; the Australian government does too. According to the federal budget papers, the purpose of universities is ‘to grow the knowledge-based economy’, as if somewhere on earth there exists an economy based on ignorance. (Clichés such as the ‘knowledge-based economy’ always bring to mind Goethe’s famous quip: ‘When ideas fail, words come in very handy’.)

Some universities have sought to calculate their exact ‘value’ in dollars and cents. With their help, Charles Sturt University is able to claim it contributes \$264 million to the gross regional product. James Cook University calculates its value to the local economy at \$445 million. According to KPMG, every dollar spent on higher education produces a return of 15%, which makes everyone in society better off. Sounds miraculous and it would be if it were true. Unfortunately, as Alison Wolf showed 10 years ago, there is no ‘simple, direct relationship between the amount of education in a society and its future growth rate’.⁹

Switzerland is a wealthy country, yet it invests less of its national wealth in higher education than does Poland. France, a developed country, invests less than Chile, a developing one. Brazil, one of the ten largest economies in the world, achieved strong economic growth while spending less than any OECD country on its universities. Hong Kong has grown rich with a tiny university sector, whereas Russia, a country with many universities, has stagnated. The United Kingdom is home to many of the world’s leading universities, yet its economy is in wretched condition.

Assessing the value of universities by their contribution to the GDP is what philosophers call a ‘category error’. Of course, universities contribute to the economy, but so does Shakespeare. Tourists to Stratford-upon-Avon spend millions per year on hotel rooms, meals, and coffee mugs with quotes from Hamlet.

Thousands of people are employed printing Shakespeare's plays, selling copies of his sonnets and acting in Shakespearian productions. The wine sold during intervals at the Globe Theatre amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Should we conclude that Shakespeare is valuable because he helps to sell books, coffee mugs and wine? Of course not. Do we take our children to the Great Barrier Reef because tourism is essential to the Queensland tax base? Do we invite friends over for a glass of wine because it makes money for vineyards? It has been said before, but Oscar Wilde's words bear repeating: we seem to know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Newman retains his appeal because he eloquently resisted the idea that higher education should be measured in financial terms. He argued instead for a higher purpose:

... University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life.

We do not have to take Newman's word for this. Carefully conducted studies have demonstrated the 'extra' value of higher education. For example, in countries where voting is not compulsory, university graduates are more likely to vote than non-graduates.¹⁰ In all countries, graduates are less likely to commit crimes and more likely to volunteer than non-graduates. They are also more likely to participate in public debate,¹¹ and to be tolerant toward migrants.¹²

In other words, universities diminish their work when they construe their aim as only making money. This is as true today as it was in Newman's time, and this is the reason Newman's arguments remain popular.

Newman's modern relevance

Despite his eloquence, Newman was wrong about practical knowledge. Universities are right to be concerned with preparing students for paid work; a fulfilling career is part of a good life. But there is a problem: the skills required for employment today are not necessarily those that will be needed in the future. Students leaving university this year will retire around 2060. We don't know what the world will look like in 2016, let alone 2060. All we can be sure of is that the world will change.

To prepare graduates for an ever-changing future, universities need to do more than teach them a narrow set of vocational skills — how to keep accounts, work computers or draw a blood sample — they also need to help graduates develop traits that allow them to keep learning. In Newman's words, the goal of higher education is to: '... open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression'.¹³ In contrast to job-related skills, these ones never become obsolete.

Universities short-change students when they focus just on money. If universities do their jobs properly, graduates gain much more than job skills. They also learn about themselves. Educated people know what they consider important and what is trivial; they understand what to mock and what to take seriously, and they know what to live for and, when necessary, what to fight for.

Unfortunately, in the age of money, much has been lost from higher education. Some modern writers fear that education has lost its soul. *The Lost Soul of Higher Education*, by Ellen Schrecker¹⁴ and Harry R. Lewis's *Excellence Without a Soul*¹⁵ are two recent examples. I don't think I have ever heard any of my academic colleagues use the word 'soul', at least not

in connection with university learning. Yet soul is exactly the right word. Our universities have made a Faustian bargain. Like the scholar in Goethe's play, we have traded our souls for money, and such transactions rarely turn out to as win-win scenarios.

For the health of society, Gandhi warned us to be on guard against science without humanity; politics without principle; knowledge without character; wealth without work; commerce without morality; pleasure without conscience; and worship without sacrifice. He may not have realised it, but he was echoing Newman's view about the nature and purpose of higher education.

It's not too late to turn things around. Newman's university may have been a failure and his attitudes toward research and practical knowledge belong to a different age, but John Henry Newman's defence of a liberal education continues to captivate academics, a kindly humanistic light amid th'encircling gloom.

Author note

Parts of this paper were adapted from a talk delivered to Campion College (see S. Schwartz, 'Cardinal Newman and Modern University', *Connor Court Quarterly*, Special Edition, 5/6, 2012).

Endnotes

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- 2 JH Newman, *The idea of a university*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1996 (original 1899).
- 3 S Collini, *What are universities for?* Pelican, London, 2012.
- 4 Newman, op. cit., p. 177.
- 5 D Warsh, *Knowledge and the wealth of nations: a story of economic discovery*, Norton, New York, 2006, p. 30.
- 6 Collini, op. cit., p. 60.

- 7 J Engell & A Dangerfield, *Saving higher education in the age of money*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA, 2005, p. 2.
- 8 Newman, op cit., Discourse 7.
- 9 A Wolf, *Does education matter?* Penguin, London, 2002.
- 10 J Brennan et al., *Things we know and don't know about the wider benefits of higher education: A review of the recent literature* (BIS Research Paper 133), Department of Business and Skills, London, 2013.
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- 12 Brennan et al., op cit., p. 22.
- 13 Newman, op. cit., Discourse 5.
- 14 E Schrecker, *The lost soul of higher education*, The New Press, New York, 2010.
- 15 HR Lewis, *Excellence without a soul*, Public Affairs, New York, 2006.