

Stephen Toope (UBC) on global challenges and the organizational-ethical dilemmas of universities

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Last spring, Vice-Chancellor Nigel Thrift of Warwick University posed a profound ethical challenge to universities around the world. He asked if we are appropriately organized to fulfill our contemporary mission.

At least since the creation of the land-grant universities in North America it has been received wisdom that universities have three interlocking goals and opportunities: to foster student learning; to preserve and increase the store of human knowledge; and to engage with the wider society. Some commentators like to call contemporary universities “multiversities” because of this complexity of mission, and they note that the goals and opportunities are not invariably in synch, despite the fond wishes of university leaders who suggest that there is an inevitable synergy amongst teaching-research-community engagement.

Nigel Thrift’s welcome challenge is to ask how the three goals of contemporary universities, and especially the goal of community engagement (or ‘service’ in its more condescending formulation), might be better pursued. His implicit suggestion, carefully not insisted upon, is that universities might do a better job if they banded together in deeper partnerships to address the great crises of our times. Prof. Thrift focuses upon the example of climate change, and it is a most appropriate choice, being scientifically complex, geographically unfocussed and full of potentially devastating effects. Other contributors to the online dialogue on *GlobalHigherEd* have advanced other causes eminently worthy of global attention from our universities: pandemic disease, income inequality, pervasive poverty, ideological fundamentalism. I would add, especially for countries of immigration, understanding and fully benefitting from cultural diversity.

The superficial answer to Prof. Thrift’s challenge is obvious. Given that we have not been able to solve our fundamental problems, nor to fully exploit our opportunities, the answer demanded by Prof. Thrift’s question must be ‘no’: universities around the globe are not optimally organized to do what the world needs us to do. I suggest, however, that to figure out a way forward, the primary question needs to be torn apart into a series of related questions. Why are we organized the way we are? How easy will it be to re-organize ourselves? What promising models might be pursued? What are the limits to re-invention? Each of these questions is complex, and I will only be able to trace out some tentative answers in this short response. What is more, the

answers are not always encouraging. So as not to descend into paralysis, however, I will end by joining President Indira Samarasekara in proposing a few concrete ways in which we might improve our collective ability to harness the brains, energy and heart of our universities, to do our fundamental job: helping to make the world a better place through education and research.

First a caveat, as I am an academic after all! Ever since becoming a university president, and beginning to read and listen to others of my cohort, I have been struck by a tendency to assume that the world today is entirely different than it was twenty or fifty or a hundred or two hundred years ago. The idea seems to be attractive to some colleague presidents that it is our destiny to fundamentally re-shape what we have inherited. This impulse is often prompted by a sense of frustration with our own faculty members who are accused of not “getting it,” of somehow living in the past. By the way, I do not suggest that Prof. Thrift reveals these tendencies, for I know him to be far more subtle. But it is worth remembering that universities are one of the only social institutions to have survived, both intact and wildly changed, since the medieval era. (Other examples are religious institutions, now under increasing attack, and some political institutions, like the Icelandic parliament). This is no accident. Universities have proven themselves to be crucial to social, economic and cultural evolution. In seeking to promote needed change, we must be careful to acknowledge the strength that we bring to the task. The mix of conservatism and openness that marks universities, probably due in large measure to our commitment to collegial governance, is a remarkable asset, even as I acknowledge that it can lead to frustration, and a failure sometimes to seize the day.

The Confines of History and Nation

As suggested just above, university organization is very much an inherited trait. Most of us have forms of collegial governance in relation to academic decision-making: senates or governing councils of some kind. They often must work in conjunction with boards whose duties are focused on the financial and property aspects of the university. Professors, even in those places where tenure has not been fully established or preserved, are best thought of as ‘independent contractors’; they are certainly not placed within a directive hierarchy. University ‘management,’ at least in relation to the academic side of the house, is much more about encouragement and cajoling, and sometimes even shaming, than about ‘executing to plan.’ Concrete student expectations tend to be oriented to the short term, like keeping tuition low, improving access to courses, and not being too disrupted by physical changes to the campus, even when student visions are grand, like equality, environmental sustainability and fairness. I doubt that this conundrum has changed all that much in the past couple of hundred years.

Prof. Thrift and other commentators have noted that the nation-based organization of universities is one of the central problems in promoting effective cross-border collaboration. Of course, this too is historically contingent. Just as the law of commerce was once fundamentally transnational (the medieval *lex mercatoria*), universities, though physically implanted in one place, were deeply cross-cultural. We all know the stories of wandering scholars like Erasmus, who contributed to the academic life of Paris, Leuven, Cambridge, and Basel. Although we are currently experiencing a re-discovery of the basic need for mobility amongst scholars, our national systems are not fully cooperating. There are still many barriers to international recruitment, like impaired transferability of credentials (especially amongst the professions) and narrow-minded visa rules. Moreover, many of our most important funding mechanisms (e.g. national research councils) remain inwardly focused, doing precious little to foster global collaboration. For North American public universities, we are also confronted by sub-national constraints. We are partially funded by state or provincial governments; even recruiting students from a few hundred kilometers away can be controversial.

The Risks of Hubris

Hubris may be the greatest flaw of universities, especially big ones with strong reputations. We need to recognize that our own brilliant hiring and attraction of 'top' students cannot of itself create a critical mass of talent sufficient to solve fundamental global problems. We must find partners. We must collaborate, not only with other universities but with community groups, civil society organizations, industry, and government. Even if we are to create effective cross-sectoral collaboration, we must also display some pragmatism, defining our ambitions with realism. 'Grand challenges,' unless sufficiently specified and broken down, can turn into attempts to boil the ocean.

Chasing Ephemera

Rather than focusing intently on what needs to be improved in the world, university leadership can become preoccupied with superficial measures of reputation: university rankings; collecting prestigious partners; satisfying consumerist understandings of what student learning is all about. Universities can also find themselves responding to the immediate rather than the important. We are challenged by research funding vehicles that focus on short term wins or immediate political issues. The pre-occupation with 'commercialization' of research in the first part of this century is a good example, but so too was the rush to create new computer science and electrical engineering spaces for students just as the tech bubble was bursting in the 1990s. Perhaps we should have been pushing for more

geographers, economists, political scientists, and sociologists to help us figure out how to promote a more sustainable world.

Models of Collaboration

So far, none of the university networks that sprang up at the beginning of this century has fulfilled its promise. Attempts to jump-start research collaboration on crucial issues through these networks have seen modest success at best. Let's be honest. Just because presidents and vice-chancellors say they would like something to happen on the research front does not make it happen, even if we can cobble together 'seed' funding. Research networks typically arise in an organic fashion from the bottom up. Our faculty and graduate students notice good work somewhere else, and they reach out at a conference or online. Exchanges may begin, and true collaboration evolves. Perhaps we can facilitate such organic growth, but we cannot direct it hierarchically. Some research communities, like high energy physics and astronomy, have been very effective at creating multinational networks out of necessity: their need for large facilities. The same trend is now seen in life sciences and clinical research. In other words, researchers will naturally form networks to solve big problems with high infrastructure costs.

An example of a strong international research network is the structural genomics consortium, which has a solid base in Canada, but with partners globally. It has attracted significant support for UK partners through the Wellcome Trust, and is well established in Sweden. My own university is involved in outstanding collaborative work in the field of quantum materials with the University of Tokyo and the Max Planck Society. In the field of climate change, which Prof. Thrift focuses upon, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has already created an influential experts group that already includes many university researchers, but we have not been able to link the IPCC effectively with broader university research agendas. We need to learn from successful global collaborations if we are to expand our reach to address the fundamental problems of our era.

Possible Ways Forward

Build from the bottom up. Where are there research teams, and groups of dedicated and inspired students, who are already working together across borders? Can we support them, and help them find new partners in other places? By starting with small, focused and effective networks we can build up confidence to move to more ambitious global platforms. How do we seek out real commitment to specific efforts, rather than the 'why not, we can do that too' response?

Challenge National myopia. Those of us living and working in the USA or the European Union must make a specific effort to look outside the borders for

partnerships that may be less obvious. Those living in smaller states need to encourage our governments to change rules to allow research funding that crosses borders, even though we may seem like small players. We should encourage national research councils to sponsor joint initiatives. We all must do more to facilitate and fund migration of students and scholars. If university folk get a chance to meet one another informally and over time, the chances of effective collaboration later are significantly enhanced.

Communicate authentically about strengths. None of our universities is good at everything. There are many important global issues. Where are we best placed to make a real difference, working with others? In the case of my own university, I suspect that we are most likely to contribute in a major way to global solutions on climate change and sustainability more generally. We could also make a real difference in collaborating on the prevention and control of infectious disease, and in intercultural understanding. Our ability to lead in a global effort to understand and combat ideological fundamentalism is less obvious. Like all universities, our expertise is not entirely balanced across all areas of research. In UBC's case, we have deep knowledge of Asia, but have invested little in creating knowledge of the Middle East. This reaffirms the necessity of cooperation.

Help our students and alumni become global citizens. In focusing, as we almost inevitably do, on research as a means of addressing global problems, we should never forget that our most important 'translators' are our graduates. Are our students being exposed to classes in which they really confront the problems of our era? Are we doing enough to help students see how they could make a difference in the world? Are we helping them connect with the wider community during their studies (e.g. through community-service learning)? Are enough of our students being introduced to perspectives from other cultures, other parts of the world?

Walk the talk. Universities must learn to be more Janus-faced. By that, I mean the opposite of hypocritical. If we are really going to address the fundamental problems of global society, we can't just research solutions and preach. We need to act on our own campuses, and in our local communities, as well. Are we leaders in economic, environmental and social sustainability? How aggressive are our own greenhouse gas reduction targets? Are we modeling best practices in intercultural dialogue? Do our own workforce practices address issues of income inequality?