

The University and Its Communities

by

David Watson

Institute of Education, University of London, U.K.

In this paper I propose that university “civic and community engagement” can be described in three domains. I then explore the consequences of these types of engagement for the declared values of the institution.

First order engagement arises from the university just being there. One of the primary roles for universities is to produce graduates who go to work (perhaps in areas completely unconnected with those they have studied); who play their parts in civil society (where the evidence suggests they are likely to contribute more wisdom and tolerance than if they had not been to university); who have families (and read to their children); who pay their taxes (and return a proportion of their higher-than-average incomes as graduates through progressive taxation); and who (increasingly) support “their” universities, through gifts and legacies.

Also in this domain, universities guard treasures (real and virtual), in their museums galleries and archives. They provide a safe place for the exploration of difficult issues or challenging ideas. They also supply material for a branch of popular culture (the campus novel, film and TV series).

Together these features add resonance to the university as a social institution in its own right: at its best a model of continuity and a focus of aspiration for a better and more fulfilled life; at its worst a source of envy and resentment.

“First order” considerations also imply that universities should strive to behave well; to be ethical beacons. They haven’t always done so. Some examples of “bad behaviour” include the following. They can offer misleading promotion and advice, to staff, students and potential students, about their real performance and intentions. As powerful institutions they can undermine and intimidate their members, their partners and their clients. They can perpetuate self-serving myths. They can hide behind specious arguments (narrow constructions of “academic freedom,” *force majeure*, and the like). They can displace responsibilities (and blame others). They can fail the “stewardship test” (for example, by not assessing and responding to risk, or by cutting corners, or by “letting go”). They can be bad neighbours. Above all, they can fail to tell the truth to themselves as least as easily as failing to tell truth to power.

Second order engagement is generally structured and mediated by contracts. In this domain the university will produce graduates in required disciplines and professional areas (whether directly or indirectly required to do so). It will respond to perceived needs for particular skills, for professional updating, or to more general consumer demand for courses in particular subjects. It will supply services, research and development, consultancy etc., at either a subsidised or a “for-profit” rate. It may run subsidiary businesses – some as “spin-outs” or joint ventures, others in the “service” sector of entertainment, catering, conference or hotel facilities.

Also in this domain the university will often be a very important local and regional economic player. It supplies employment – from unskilled occupations to the very skilled. It provides an expanded consumer base, as students and staff are attracted to the institution and its locality. It offers a steady, well-indemnified customer for goods and services. It is a source of “development” in a myriad of fields, such as environmental improvements, buildings, amenities, office space, along with some downsides, like controversy over planning, car-parking, congestion or “studentification.”

The first domain affects the second in some complex and significant ways. The university, as a kind of moral force, is expected to behave better than other large organisations (which are similarly concerned about the bottom line).

Some of these cross-over effects are mild: if the university didn’t pay its bills on time the community would be shocked, if the local hotel did the same thing they would shrug their shoulders. Others are economically more serious. In major partnerships, on which perhaps millions of pounds rest, you will rarely if ever see the university walk away from a done deal. Meanwhile the commercial partner can do so with apparent impunity, citing the business cycle, a change of management or policy, or simply “market forces.”

And so, if universities are to make a steady and a positive contribution to their communities, the key holistic concept, and an essential backdrop for questions of leadership and management, has to be the rather old-fashioned notion of *stewardship*, of both the intellectual and moral, as well as the concrete and practical assets of the university itself. Who is ultimately responsible for the security, the ongoing contribution and the performance of the university?

The simplest answer to this question in the UK is the university itself, through its *governance*. The governing body is straightforwardly responsible for safeguarding the assets (including setting the budget); for setting the strategy (often called “character and mission”); and for employing and admitting the members (in the case of students, through delegation to the Senate or Academic Board).

But sometimes these perspectives can be too narrow, especially if they are permanently refracted through the lens of institutional survival. There is a wider social interest in the higher education enterprise (essential to the “first order” relationships set out before), for which governors ought also to feel responsible. This can mean not being too precious (or too competitive) about boundaries, about status, or about the reputational risk of association with other institutions in the sector. *Autonomy* is important, and a source of strength, but it does not apply in a vacuum; it should not be used as an excuse for pushing others around, and it should be used to serve the sector as well as the single institution.

Third order engagement is between the university and its members.

Universities are voluntary communities: around the world they are rarely part of the compulsory educational infrastructure of the state (although the state may heavily invest, for its own purposes). Thus they should not be regarded as agents of the state in creating citizens (and certainly not subjects). This is, of course, not to say (following the precepts of “first order” relationships) that they do not play a role in ensuring social cohesion, in promoting community solidarity and in problem-solving for policy-makers and practitioners of all kinds.

University members have a similar set of obligations inside the tent; there is the dimension of *academic citizenship*. To be a full member of a university you have to contribute to more than completing the tasks that happen to be in front of your nose at the time. For traditional academics this has meant collective obligations: to assessment, to committee membership and to strategic scoping; and there is a growing body of literature about such professional academic practice.

What happened in the late 20th century was the discovery that such practice no longer belonged exclusively to the ranks of the so-called “faculty.” The teaching, research and service environments are increasingly recognised as being supported and developed by university members with a variety of types of expertise (finance, personnel, estates, libraries, communications and information technology, and so on), each with their own spheres of professional competence, responsibility and recognition.

At the heart of academic citizenship is the concept of *membership*. When you sign up (most obviously as a student, but equally significantly as a staff member), what is the deal? What are the responsibilities that go along with all of your rights within the community; and, if you are a student, with your entitlements and expectations as a consumer? Such responsibilities include the following:

- A special type of academic honesty, structured most clearly around scientific procedure.
- Reciprocity and honesty in expression (for example by accurately and responsibly referring to other people’s work within your own – avoiding plagiarism).
- Academic manners (as in listening to and taking account of other people’s views).
- Striving towards self-motivation and the capacity for independent learning, along with “learning how to learn”.
- Submission to discipline (most clearly in the case of assessment – for both assessors and the assessed).
- Respect for the environment in which members of the college or university work.
- Adherence to a set of collectively arrived at commitments and policies (on equalities, grievances, harassment, etc.).

Aware and protective as we are about such values, how far should we codify and declare them to the community outside? On what can our communities rely, in moral and ethical terms?

In 1968, the late Lord Eric Ashby was Master of Clare College, Cambridge, and Vice-Chancellor of the University. (For a scholarly account of Ashby’s immense contribution to the wider HE world see Silver [2003, pp. 151-73], and for his still highly relevant analysis of the academic estate see Ashby [1959, *passim*]). At the Association of Commonwealth Universities in Sydney that year he delivered an address, part of which was later printed in the journal *Minerva*, under the title “A Hippocratic Oath for the Academic Profession” (Ashby, 1969). Nearly forty years later, it has a contemporary resonance as we struggle with the question of whether or not society’s legitimate expectations of higher education should be codified.

Ashby saw the fundamental commitment as the higher education “teacher’s duty to his pupils” to inculcate “the discipline of constructive dissent.” “It has to be a constructive dissent that fulfils an overriding condition: it must shift the state of opinion about the subject in such a way that the experts are prepared to concur.” This led him to a firm defence of academic freedom:

Innovative thinking is unpopular and dangerous. So society has to be indulgent to its universities; it must permit some professors to say silly and unimportant things so that a few professors can say wise and important things (Ashby, 1969).

Ashby’s focus was on the teacher. Some institutions in the United States believe that such an oath is even more about students, to the extent of requiring graduates to affirm certain propositions about how they will proceed to live their lives in the light of their “academic” experience.

Another approach is more relativistic. It will stress context, the potential effects of *force majeure*, or the need to respond to what “funders,” “customers” or “stake-holders” think and say they want. Institutions will claim to have sticking-points, but they will also be willing to negotiate and to compromise. This approach to ethics will – at its best – be one of “progressive engagement” rather than (literally) dogmatic assessment and response. There is a powerful sense of such a tendency in the Institute of Business Ethics (IBE) and Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) document, *Ethics Matters* (IBE/CIHE, 2005). The Report states categorically:

Universities and colleges are complex and autonomous organisations, each with a distinct history and culture. Ethical issues and priorities will not be the same in all institutions and each HEI will need to tackle ethical concerns in a way that makes sense for its own organisation (*Ibid.*, p. 7).

To say this is, of course, to commit to a certain philosophical view of ethics: that they will be situational, and, to an extent, provisional. It is a view that resonates well with certain characteristics of the university project and community: that it is always wrestling with complex and often “wicked” issues. It is not, however, the only view. Others would argue that “ethical issues and priorities *are* the same in all institutions,” painful and awkward though this might be for their managers and many of their members; that the question of “managing ethical issues” doesn’t arise: there is simply the issue of managing their *consequences*. If this dialogue is to be worthy of the name, it needs to accept that keeping ethical commitments will be hard, may have negative effects on the bottom line, and should not sink into the pre-emptive, “damage-limitation” mind-set that has come to characterise some institutional reactions to some legal and related codes. That way may lie the “surface compliance” traps of speech codes and political correctness, as well as the “displacement effect” of hiding behind other people’s responsibilities (in his recent book, Bruce Macfarlane reports on how many academics are relieved when the responsibility for ethical judgement is taken away from them, and dealt with formally at a different level in the organisation [Macfarlane, 2005, p. 118]).

So there are problems with both of these approaches: the Benthamite calculus and the Kantian counsel of perfection. Yet another approach (I hesitate to call it the “third way”) has been set out by Bruce Macfarlane. Following Alasdair MacIntyre, he sets out a list of “virtues” in *Teaching with Integrity: the Ethics of Higher Education Practice* (Macfarlane, 2004, pp. 128-29). Each has a virtuous “mean,” as well as potential defects of “vice” and “excess:”

- Respectfulness
- Sensitivity
- Pride
- Courage
- Fairness
- Openness
- Restraint
- Collegiality

The problem here for many will be that it turns being an academic into a form of moral rearmament. Macfarlane’s goal is “the development of the moral character of lecturers in higher education” (*Ibid.*, p. 145). Many will be uncomfortable about an approach that stresses “what people should *be* rather than what they ought to *do*” (*Ibid.*, p. 35).

As a contribution to the debate, I have tried to scope out what the ten commandments given to a higher education institution (by whom?) might be. The intention is in no sense satirical, or even sceptical. In technical terms, this is to take a *deontological* view of ethics (concerned with obligation) rather than an *axiological* (concerned with judgements of value). I do believe that universities and colleges can choose to behave well, or badly, and that it is in our social as well as moral interests to help them to do the former.

1. *Strive to tell the truth.*

“Academic freedom,” in the sense of following difficult ideas wherever they may lead, is possibly the fundamental “academic” value.

2. *Take care in establishing the truth.*

Adherence to scientific method is critical here (as in the use of evidence, and “falsifiability” principle), but so too is the concept of social scientific “warrant”, and the search for “authenticity” in the humanities and arts (leading, in particular, to concerns about rhetoric and persuasion independently of the grounds for conviction).

3. *Be fair.*

This is about equality of opportunity, non-discrimination, and perhaps even affirmative action. As has been pointed out, along with “freedom” in the academic value-system goes “respect for persons.”

4. *Always be ready to explain.*

Academic freedom is a “first amendment” and not a “fifth amendment” right; it is about freedom of speech and not about protection from self-incrimination (Watson, 2000, pp. 85-87). It does not absolve any member from the obligation to explain his or her actions, and as far as possible their consequences. Accountability is inescapable, and should not be unreasonably resisted.

5. *Do no harm.*

This where the assessment of consequences cashes out (and presents our nearest equivalent to the Hippocratic oath, to strive “not to harm, but to help”). It is about non-exploitation, either of human subjects, or of the environment. It underpins other notions like “progressive engagement.” It helps with really wicked issues, like the use of animals in medical experiments.

6. *Keep your promises.*

As suggested above, “business” excuses for retreating from or unreasonably seeking to re-negotiate agreements are much less acceptable in an academic context.

7. *Respect your colleagues, your students and especially your opponents.*

Working in an academic community means listening, as well as speaking, seeking always to understand the other point of view, and ensuring that rational discourse is not derailed by prejudice, by egotism, or by bullying of any kind.

8. *Sustain the community.*

All of the values so far expressed are deeply communal. Obligations that arise are not just to the subject or professional community, or even to the institution in which you might be working at any one time, but to the family of institutions that make up the university sector, nationally and internationally.

9. *Guard your treasure.*

University and college communities, and those responsible for leading and managing them, are in the traditional sense “stewards” of real and virtual assets, and of the capacity to continue to operate responsibly and effectively.

10. *Never be satisfied.*

Academic communities understood the principles of “continuous improvement” long before it was adopted by “management” literature. They also understand its merciless and asymptotic nature. The academic project will never be complete or perfect.

In other words, my claim is that there exist value domains that are special to higher education, and which in wider contexts constitute higher education’s contributions to civil society in all of its endeavours. These domains represent my “types of engagement” in reverse. One is clearly about how knowledge is effectively and responsibly created, tested and used. Another is about how people responsibly interact with each other (including what they take from the university when they move outside it). And the third is about the institutional presence of universities and colleges in a wider society.

References

- Ashby, E. (1969), A Hippocratic Oath for the Academic Profession, *Minerva*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January, pp. 64-66.
- Institute of Business Ethics (IBE) and Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) (2005), *Ethics Matters: Managing Ethical Issues in Higher Education*, CIHE, London.
- Macfarlane, B. (2005), *Teaching with Integrity: the Ethics of Higher Education Practice*, RoutledgeFalmer, Abingdon.
- Watson, David (2000), *Managing Strategy*, Open University, Press Buckingham.

Note

A fuller version of this argument will appear in David Watson, (2007) *Managing Civic and Community Engagement*, McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.