

## **Challenges of Openness and Quality for Smart Universities in the Post-Truth and Post-Trust Era**

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### **Abstract**

A ‘smart university’ is a university that exploits education’s digital future. What is their role at a time when universities are accused of being on the ‘wrong side of history’? Contemporary 'post-truth' and 'post-trust' attitudes undermine higher education's historic commitment to rigorous knowledge, academic openness, professional expertise and international collaboration as the basis for human progress. We explore the political developments behind these attitudes.

Despite these trends, however, humankind will depend on universities for its healthy development into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whereas the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 were limited to basic education, the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 have higher education as one of their targets, namely: “by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education.”

This means that smart universities must offer greater curricular diversity. Degrees are a useful foundation, providing evidence that a graduate has learned to think, but today’s hybrid jobs require extra skills. People must learn to dissect post-truth discourse and post-trust attitudes so as to position themselves on the continua between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive that are successors to the older left/right political distinctions. Measuring learning outcomes in these new curricular contexts challenges traditional quality assurance methods, not least when shorter courses on specific items of knowledge and expertise are delivered online.

Online learning is also a powerful tool for opening up institutional reach, especially to older part-time students. By making people more aware of their thinking processes online study helps them be more purposeful in pursuing lifelong learning, which in turn makes for better persistence and outcomes. The combination of online technology with the philosophy of openness, as exemplified in open source software, open access to research findings and open educational resources is of particular relevance to would-be smart universities.

### **Introduction**

This World Learning Summit is about ‘Smart Universities’. What is a smart university and how does a university merit the title? Exploiting ‘education’s digital future’ is a common theme. The University of Glasgow (Catapult Future Cities, 2016) declares that its smart campus: ‘actively learns from and adapts to the needs of its people and place, unlocking the potential of e-technology and enabling world-changing learning and research.’

Hwang (2014) states that ‘a smart learning system can be perceived as a technology-enhanced learning system that is capable of advising learners to learn in the real world with access to digital resources’, adding that ‘the rapid progress of mobile, wireless communication and sensing technologies has enabled the development of context-aware ubiquitous learning environments, which are able to detect the real-world learning status of students as well as the environmental contexts.’ We shall focus first on the terms ‘real world’ and ‘context-aware ubiquitous learning’.

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The contemporary situation in the 'real world' is that surges of nationalism, nativism and populism aim to make societies more closed. An egregious example was the legislation passed in Hungary in April, 2017 threatening to remove the right to operate from the Central European University, which was set up expressly as an 'island of liberal thought' in former communist states (The Guardian, 2017). This and similar events are inimical to higher education's historic commitment to global openness and rigorous knowledge as the basis for human progress. Such political trends discount the importance of experts, elites and internationalism. They challenge would-be smart universities, not least because 'digital world resources' and 'mobile wireless communication' can promote 'alternative facts' as readily as verifiable knowledge.

Our first section examines the trends that have brought us to this 'post-truth' and 'post-trust' era, noting the impact of populism of both left and right. As a result, the old left-right political spectrum is no longer as salient as continua between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive.

In the second section, we argue that despite this dispiriting context, humankind will depend greatly on universities for its healthy development into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The inclusion of higher education in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is just one indicator of a global consensus on its importance (UNESCO, 2015; 2016). But how should higher education respond to this new context? The core objectives of universities are to stand up for evidence, stand up for facts and stand up for the truth (Glover, 2017). University graduates should acquire an attitude of systematic scepticism. This requires curricula that put less emphasis on didactic teaching and more on debate, both online and face to face.

Section three explores how our understanding of quality in higher education - and the means of assuring it - have evolved in recent decades. How can quality assurance adapt to these new challenges? The current emphasis of quality assurance on articulating and measuring student learning outcomes is well suited to the teaching methods now required.

In a final section, we urge that the various trends towards openness in academe (e.g. in software creation, access to research results and the sharing of educational resources) can be powerful forces for nourishing diversity and countering trends to close down debate.

### **The Post-truth and Post-Trust Era**

We start with the post-truth and post-trust era. Each year the Oxford dictionaries choose a 'word of the year'. For 2016 that word was 'post-truth'. They define post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Their example is the sentence: "In this era of post-truth politics, it is easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire."

Loss of trust in institutions is another feature of our times. This can be a gradual process. Over 50 years the trust that Americans have in government has declined from 80% to 20%. Trust in government is one of many measures that the Economist Intelligence Unit conflates to produce its annual democracy index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). In 2016, for the first time, the US no longer ranked among the world's 19 'full democracies', but has been demoted to 'flawed democracy'.

In his book, *Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, Francis Fukuyama (1995) demonstrated persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly to the trust that their people have in each other and in their institutions. Some countries flourish because strangers learned to trust one another when signing contracts, allowing them to do deals outside the circles of family, tribal or in-group kinship relied upon in low-trust societies. Contrast Sweden and Sicily or Norway and Nigeria.

The rector of the University of Oslo, Ole Petter Ottersen, argues that universities should be trust building as well as truth seeking. "In our age of turbulence", he argues, "these two words – trust and truth – are inextricably intertwined" (Ottersen, 2016).

Populism is the political expression of these trends away from truth and trust. It combines nostalgia for the past, post-truth rhetoric, lack of trust in experts and institutions, a desire to divide and, above all, hostility to whatever can be labelled elite, usually by an accuser from another elite.

Populism can develop on either side of the conventional left/right political spectrum. Its common factor is an attempt to mobilise ordinary people against elites that are perceived to be self-serving. Right-wing populism also accuses these elites of coddling a third group, usually immigrants and other minorities (Judis, 2016).

Trump and Sanders stood for the right-wing and left-wing versions of populism in the 2016 US election campaign. In Europe, the right wing has the National Front in France and UKIP in Britain, while the left wing has Podemos and Syriza in Spain and Greece.

Recent events in Hungary are an alarming example of the threat that populist politics poses to universities. On April 4, 2017 the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, pushed a bill through parliament aimed at closing the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, a prestigious university with an international mission and staff and students from over 100 countries. Transforming it into a Hungarian institution with a different name will, in his view, eliminate nefarious influences from abroad. Academics around the world have reacted angrily to this blatant attack on academic freedom and internationalism. The CEU's Rector, Michael Ignatieff, has pledged to keep the university and its values alive at all costs. Can this be achieved in a closing society? We note, as examples, two symptoms of the threats to truth and trust in closing societies.

First, 'expert' was used as a pejorative term in the 2016 referendum and election contests in the UK and the USA. British Leave-the-EU campaigners told people to disbelieve expert projections about the impact of Brexit, whether from economists, newspaper columnists or diplomats. In the USA, the Trump campaign denigrated the work of the intelligence services and the Bureau of Labour Statistics. Some Brexiteers cheered the post-referendum resignation of the UK's representative in Brussels, Sir Ivan Rogers, the top expert on UK-EU relations. In his farewell letter to staff he wrote: "I hope you will continue to challenge ill-founded arguments and muddled thinking and that you will never be afraid to speak the truth to those in power". He added "I hope that you will continue to be interested in the views of others, even where you disagree with them, and in understanding why others act and think in the way that they do" (BBC News, 2017).

That is good advice to Smart Universities. The business of higher education is to produce experts in all fields of human endeavour. We must teach them use their expertise confidently and fearlessly.

A second but less obvious symptom of post-truth and post-trust thinking is loss of belief in progress. Higher education is grounded in a belief that change is welcome because, on the whole, it is for the better. The students in our universities believe that, by pursuing truth, they will operate from a higher base of knowledge and skill than we did, whether in dentistry, ecology, history or philosophy. They expect that their more advanced knowledge and skills will create a better world.

Although they do not always call them 'the good old days', many contemporary politicians hark back to a time when things were supposedly better. Wisely, they don't usually specify when that time was, because surveys show that most people think the world was at its best when they were in their early twenties. Dating the good old days is subjective. Nevertheless, nostalgia has resurfaced in a big way.

People and movements are reaching back to an illusory past and trying to chart the future through a form of retreat (Kelly, 2016).

There are two antidotes to this: facts and knowledge. “Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory”, so higher education must be a good memory for humanity. All graduates should leave college with a grasp of the broad sweep of human development. We recommend a recent summary by the Swedish historian Johan Norberg, who documents the enormous progress achieved, not just over previous centuries but also over the decades since the badly remembered 'good old days'. His book, *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*, is a powerful antidote to the temptation to generalise from the latest news report about a famine, a war or the health challenges of modern life and think how awful things are now (Norberg, 2016).

Arguing that ‘the Good Old Days are now’, Norberg documents long-term trends for the better in vital areas of life all over the world. These underlying trends are persistent and will continue despite occasional setbacks or bad choices.

However, populist campaigns are usually advance warning of political crises. There are many such today and our higher education graduates will have to live through them and solve them.

### **How should Higher Education respond?**

Despite the challenges we have outlined, humankind will depend crucially on universities for its healthy development into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One indicator is that whereas the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 were limited to basic education, the Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030 has higher education as one of the targets of Goal 4, namely: “by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education” (UNESCO, 2015).

As regards what universities teach, degrees are a useful foundation, providing evidence that a graduate has learned to think, but today’s hybrid jobs require extra skills. People must learn to dissect post-truth discourse and post-trust attitudes. They should cultivate an attitude of systematic scepticism and they must position themselves on the continua between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive that are successors to the older left/right political distinctions.

To quote Ottersen again: “what role can a truth-seeking university play in an era characterised as 'post-truth'?” His answer is that: "Faced with the prospect of a post-factual society, universities have to re-establish a respect for objective truth and powerful arguments – through our educational programmes and through our public outreach. We have to create many more arenas for debate – arenas that are open and inclusive so as to give a voice to those who feel left behind too” (Ottersen, 2016).

Pollsters noted that in the 2016 political campaigns in both the UK and the US, university graduates were much less likely than those without degrees to support populist positions. This suggests that higher education, in and of itself, acts as an antidote to post-truth and post-trust thinking. But we suggest that smart universities should be more explicit in challenging their students to position themselves along the continua of open/closed and inclusive/exclusive. We should not tell them where to position themselves but, as Ottersen said, create arenas for debate where they must address this issue personally, possibly arguing for different positions, whether they agree with them or not, rather as students do in Model United Nations simulations. More generally, smart universities must offer greater diversity in what they teach and how they enable people to learn.

Whatever the positions that individual students take, universities as institutions must stand for openness. Their motto could be the 50-year old slogan of The Open University: open to people; open

to places; open to methods; open to ideas. Their challenge is to maintain openness in the post-truth era when politics can have such a negative influence on higher education policies and practice as we can see in states like Hungary and Turkey.

### **Quality Assurance in the Post-Truth and Post Trust era**

How should quality assurance change in this post-truth and post-trust era?

In fact, quality assurance (QA) is itself a victim of post-trust attitudes. In countries where governments play the major role in quality assurance many allege that it is either too formulaic or wrongly focused. However, in jurisdictions where the responsibility for QA is left largely to the higher education community, as in the USA, some politicians argue for more state control, arguing that there is too much mutual institutional backscratching. Academics oppose political interference in accreditation fiercely because they consider that governmental pressure on accreditors makes the processes more burdensome, with increasingly uniform nationwide standards. Their greatest concern is the disregard for diversity, especially at a time when more diverse higher learning is required (Ekman, 2017).

We argue here that the times require less focus on didactic teaching and more on challenging students to debate issues and argue their emerging positions and conclusions. How can higher education ensure the quality of learning in these circumstances? Are current methods of quality assurance appropriate and adequate?

In reality, QA is constantly evolving. It developed strongly through the 1990s and by the 2000s a general model had emerged with common elements based on regulation and guidelines set by the QA agency, a self-review by the institution, an external peer review and publication of the report.

This basic model is now spreading throughout the world and methods are converging in most systems. However, as QA methods converge the focus of QA is shifting to reflect the diversification of higher education itself. Not very long ago quality was judged by inputs – grades of incoming students, qualifications of teaching staff, number of books in the library and so on. Today quality assessment focuses more on the outputs: students' learning outcomes. What have the students really learned?

Multilateral organisations, such as the OECD (2015) and the EU (CALOHEE, 2017) are supporting this development because both private companies and distinct units within public universities are now creating a new sector of higher education with offerings that are usually online and often much shorter than traditional programmes. This has been called 'post-traditional higher education'. Students' Learning Outcomes are the most solid basis for assessing the quality of such alternative provision.

In the USA Judith Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), wants 'to encourage fresh approaches to quality review of traditional providers and expand quality review to new providers and new credentialing' and to 'maintain and enhance the academic leadership of institutions and programs, peer review and the commitment to academic freedom.'

In this spirit, as an approach to QA for alternative, non-traditional providers that serve an increasingly large number of students, CHEA's International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG) developed a *Quality Platform*. This is an outcomes-based review using simple standards, a self-review by the provider and external peer (expert) review. Successful candidates are designated as *Quality Platform Providers* for a three-year period.

The *Quality Platform* was pilot-tested successfully in 2015 with Shanghai's DeTao Masters Academy. This private company is not part of China's traditional higher education system and mostly uses teachers and distinguished experts (Masters) from outside China in a wide variety of disciplines. The

programmes are run in partnership with the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts, but since they are enriched majors, rather than full degrees, they are not covered by China's normal QA frameworks.

The CHEA/CIQG Quality Platform is now being piloted by the US Department of Education in a new programme, EQUIP (Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships), designed to counterbalance what the Department itself called the "inflexible and unaffordable options" of traditional higher education for working adults. A partnership between Dallas County Community College District and Straighterline, an online content provider, is the first pilot.

Although focusing quality assurance on the articulation and achievement of student learning outcomes is a better match to the styles of learning and teaching required today than the former emphases on inputs and processes, that does not make it easy. We have argued for learning environments that place greater focus on debate and argument to help people learn how to ferret out the truth from a welter of information and 'alternative facts'.

### **How can technology help?**

Our earlier definition of a smart university talked of using 'a technology-enhanced learning system that is capable of advising learners to learn in the real world with access to digital resources' (Hwang, 2014).

Online learning is a powerful tool for opening up institutional reach, notably to older part-time students. By making people more aware of their thinking processes, online study helps them to be more purposeful in pursuing lifelong learning, which makes for better persistence and outcomes.

For smart universities in the post-truth era, technology is both part of the problem and also part of the solution. We have noted that 'access to digital resources' can turn up 'alternative facts' just as readily as verifiable knowledge. However, technology can also greatly facilitate the debates in which students should engage in order to develop their own positions and an attitude of scepticism. It can also traverse national borders and offer quality content and verifiable knowledge even where nationalistic policies attempt to shut out ideas from the external world.

The combination of online technology with the philosophy of openness, as exemplified in open source software, open access to research findings and open educational resources is of special relevance to would-be smart universities.

Target 4.3 of the Incheon Declaration cited earlier (UNESCO, 2015) refers explicitly (item 43) to Open Educational Resources as a tool for promoting higher education, noting that 'a well-established properly regulated tertiary education system, supported by technology, *open educational resources* and distance education can increase access, equity, quality and relevance.

Both authors were involved in preparing UNESCO's 2012 World Conference on Open Educational Resources and in drafting of the Paris Declaration on OER that was adopted by acclamation. Noting that the wider use of OER can also facilitate the achievement of UN goals in many areas, the Declaration argued that 'governments can create substantial benefits for their citizens by ensuring that educational materials developed with public funds be made available under open licenses (with any restrictions they deem necessary) in order to maximize the impact of the investment.'

Although the Paris Declaration did not include any formal monitoring mechanism, reports show that the use of OER by both teachers and learners is increasing steadily (University Affairs, 2017).

Although OER have not spread as rapidly as open access to research publications, open textbooks are very popular with students and substantially cut the cost of higher education in those jurisdictions that make them available.

There will be a second UNESCO Conference on Open Educational Resources in Ljubljana, Slovenia in September 2017. This will be a good occasion to assess progress and we hope it will lead to better formal mechanisms for monitoring the spread of OER in higher learning.

### **Conclusion**

We have argued that the post-truth and post-trust attitudes engendered by populist politics pose a serious challenge to higher education. Smart universities must re-establish a respect for objective truth and powerful arguments and put more of the onus on students to develop their own antibodies to alternative facts through lively debate. However, we remain optimistic that the importance of higher education to human development will continue to increase and that the momentum to greater openness in education is unstoppable.

We believe that a positive trend is already underway, with forces of truth, trust and cooperation re-asserting themselves. France's new President, Emmanuel Macron, declared, just six days ago that: "wherever we live, wherever we are, we share the same responsibility, make our planet great again".

His statement elicited praise around the world and has given support and hope to all those working against climate change who would, he said, find a second homeland in France.

In summary, we conclude that Smart Universities have a large agenda ahead of them but also a terrific opportunity to lay the foundation of a better world.

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