



Closing Keynote

Weaving it all into One

Sir John Daniel

Introduction:

Offering the closing talk at this important conference is an honour and a challenge. An honour, because I have worked in educational technology for nearly 50 years. These discussions around the implementation of the Groningen Declaration take us to the current frontiers of Ed. Tech.

It is a challenge because I have never attended a conference where I have encountered so many new concepts and practices. I congratulate all the speakers, who over the last three days, have opened up many new lines of enquiry and work.

I shall begin my remarks by reflecting with you on the conference theme, which is *The Age of Opportunity: Privacy, Trust and Learner Mobility*. Think about that for a moment. Does this really feel like an age of opportunity to you on each of those three dimensions? To whom might this not seem like an age of opportunity?

First, this will not feel like an age of opportunity to software giants grappling with a massive loss of public confidence in their protection of users' privacy. Second, it will not feel particularly hopeful to governments trying to counter a general loss of trust in institutions. Third, the significant and unpredictable changes to patterns of student mobility across the globe can hardly feel like opportunities to universities trying to manage their enrolments.

Have we got so carried away by our assumption of steady progress that we simply do not notice the erosion of that assumption? Surely, much of today's political turbulence reflects a loss of belief in progress?

Higher education is grounded in a belief in progress. Change is welcome because, on the whole, it is for the better. The students in our universities believe that they will operate from a higher base of knowledge and skill than we did, whether it is in dentistry, ecology, history or philosophy. They expect that their more advanced knowledge and skills will create a better world.

Whether it calls them 'the good old days' or not, much contemporary electioneering harks back to a time when things were better, although candidates are reluctant to specify exactly when those good old days were. That's wise, because surveys show that for most people the world was at its best when they themselves were in their early twenties, so the good old days are a moveable feast. Many of the voters responsible for the Brexit and Trump victories were nostalgic for life as it was somewhere between the early 1960s and late 1970s.

Nostalgia is a depressive state linked to a pining for a past time or place. Cathal Kelly observes that it has resurfaced on a vast scale. "Across the developed world people and movements are reaching back to an often-illusory past trying to chart the future through a form of retreat. From Trump to Brexit and beyond, we've collectively entered a funhouse time machine trudging backward."

A better theme for our conference might have been 'the age of challenge'. Have our discussions here in Paris over the last three days provided pointers to new approaches that might turn it into an age of opportunity? Have we articulated strategies for better protecting privacy? Have we identified policies that would help governments to restore trust? Have we suggested tactics for universities to adopt in the face of abrupt variations in applications from foreign students?

I shall begin by exploring these three issues of privacy strategies, policies for trust, and the recruitment of overseas students. Then I shall return to the title you have given me: *Weaving all of the Above into One*.

Privacy

Let's start with privacy. It is hard to recall that not long ago social media were the darlings of the technology industry. As their merits were vaunted from the rooftops, some did not hesitate to herald a brave new era of equality in the creation and dissemination of useful information. Organisations of all types, from banks to universities, fell all over themselves to add social media strategies to their communications and public relations portfolios. Today, their assessments are more sobering.

The realisation that our new IT idol has feet of clay has taken many forms. As *The Economist* newspaper recently commented: 'The failings of America's self-regulatory approach are becoming clearer by the week. Large parts of the online economy are fuelled by data that consumers spray around without thought. Companies' arcane privacy policies obfuscate what they do with their users' information, which often amounts to pretty much anything they please.'

An editorial published in *The Globe & Mail* newspaper just three weeks ago lifted the veil on some of the obfuscation and brought me up to date with the reality that we have drifted into. The title was '*Every click you make*'.

“Nobody reads the fine print... so here, as a public service in 2018, is a non-exhaustive compendium of what you agree to when you accept the terms of service of Facebook, Google, Amazon or virtually any other internet or social networking company.

“Depending on the company, you’re giving permission to it track your physical movements, your appointments and your meetings. If it’s a social-media app. you’re providing it with list of your friends and relatives – and a good deal more, such as a record of your internet searches. You may well have ceded control of your microphone or camera.

“Accepting an app’s request to access your phone contacts can also provide it with unfettered access to your text messages and the time, duration, location and number for every incoming and outgoing call.

“Oh, and you’re definitely allowing Facebook, LinkedIn and hundreds of others to sell aspects of this information. If they are swallowed by a bigger company that data will in all likelihood, transfer to the buyer. Often you accept that it could get hacked, stolen or misused along the way.

“The central problem is default settings: to maintain privacy one must opt in. This is exactly backwards, and it is not innocent. Companies shift responsibility to users while reserving the power to limit their privacy choices. It is the industry standard and central to many business models.

“Would we blithely accept this mixture of intrusion and lack of control if government were demanding it? Not a chance!

“The simplest summary of the modern terms of service agreement is contained in a 1983 soft-rock classic by The Police that is often mistaken for a love song – although it’s about stalking:

Every breath you take,
Every move you make,
Every bond you break,
Every step you take,
I’ll be watching you.

“Click here if you agree, the editorial concludes.

What to do? We need new rules for the Internet, but can we do this without ‘defriending’ the social media. The titans of the technology industry are the most valuable companies on earth, yet they are still coddled by tax laws as if they were an emerging industry. ‘It is time for Silicon Valley to pay unto Caesar, not least so that we plebeians can use the tax revenue to fix the things they keep breaking, such as journalism’.

To whom should we look for action? With the US mired in the politics of Donald Trump we cannot expect much from there. The European Union is slow and bureaucratic, but its General Data Protection Regulation sets a high standard. This was the topic of an interesting session at this conference, which made it clear that grappling this regulation is the first time

that many universities have had to get serious about international data privacy. I find that a promising start.

However, I also wonder how much people really care. I imagine that people like you, the delegates at this conference, do care about privacy. But I suspect that most people are happy to give away personal data that they don't really understand in exchange for daily photos of their grandchildren or some sleazy fake news stories. To return to an earlier quote: 'large parts of the online economy are fuelled by data that consumers spray around without thought'.

Can we really expect ordinary people to take to the barricades in the defence of their privacy? They assume that the elites have already conned them into abandoning their privacy.

Trust

Which brings me directly to 'trust', the second area identified as part of this 'Age of Opportunity' in our conference theme. Here 'challenge' is a much more appropriate word than 'opportunity', because we have a steep hill to climb.

In his powerful book, *Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, Francis Fukuyama argued 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 flourished 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 vicious campaigns to voters in the UK, the US and other countries in 2016 were deeply corrosive of trust, although we should not delude ourselves that this loss of trust began with Silvio Berlusconi, Viktor Orban, Donald Trump or Theresa May. Year-on-year surveys by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) show that in the US public trust in government has been declining for half-a-century. It is 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 – even before Trump's election - the US, for the first time, no longer ranked among the world's 19 'full democracies', but had been demoted to 'flawed democracy'. Sadly, restoring trust is much harder than undermining it.

The discounting of expert knowledge, the portrayal of one elite by another as evil and the erosion of trust in institutions are all damaging to societies in general and to universities in particular. How do we start to repair the damage?

Closely related to trust is respect for truth. Each year the Oxford dictionaries choose a 'word of the year'. For 2016 that word was 'post-truth'. They defined 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."

As the rector of the University of Oslo, Ole Petter Ottersen, puts it, "the lack of confidence in academia is a great challenge. What role can a truth-seeking university play in an era characterised as 'post-truth'?" He continues: "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. Universities should be trust building as well as truth seeking". He concludes: "In our age of turbulence these two words – trust and truth – are inextricably intertwined."

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.

There are two antidotes to this.

First, as an earlier writer put it, "nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory". One task of higher education is to be a good memory for humanity.

Second, all graduates should leave college - if not high school - with a grasp of the broad sweep of human development. For a concise summary, I recommend a recent account by the Swedish historian Johan Norberg, who documents the enormous progress achieved not just over previous centuries but also over the recent decades since the badly remembered 'good old days'. His fact-filled book is a powerful antidote to our tendency 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.

His introduction is titled: 'The Good Old Days are Now'. Norberg does not pretend that every step we take is a step forward, but he documents, worldwide, long-term trends for the better in vital areas of life. These trends are persistent and according to him, will continue despite occasional setbacks or bad choices.

Learner mobility

Finally, I turn to the third area alleged to be part of the age of opportunity in our conference theme, namely learner mobility. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon. In the 7th century Nalanda University in India, which was already over a thousand years old, had 10,000 students, many of them visiting Buddhists from China.

A millennium later Erasmus of Rotterdam became the symbol of learner mobility in Europe and has given his name to the world's largest international student exchange programme.

So, the question for us is not whether learner mobility is a good thing, but whether these current times are an age of opportunity or an age of challenge for it.

For readable accounts by the protagonists on each side of the argument I refer you to recent issues of *University World News*. Basically, where you stand on this issue depends on whether you believe that governments have a determining influence on learner mobility or whether it depends essentially on the whims of individual students.

Leading for those who call this an age of challenge for learner mobility are Phil Altbach and Hans de Wit, who are from the US and the Netherlands respectively. They do not mince their words. I quote:

‘The global landscape for higher education internationalisation is changing dramatically. What one might call the ‘era of higher education internationalisation over the past 25 years (1990-2015) that has characterised university thinking and action might be finished, or at least on life support. The unlimited growth of internationalisation of all kinds, including massive global student mobility, the expansion of branch campuses, franchised and joint degrees, the use of English as a language for teaching and research worldwide and many other elements – appears to have come to a rather abrupt end, especially in Europe and North America’.

They admit that that ethos and thinking in most universities is still avowedly international and that schemes like the Erasmus exchanges continue to thrive. But they also note worrying signs. The upheavals of 2016, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, by increasing the problems of obtaining visas and creating an unwelcoming atmosphere for foreign students threaten to decrease their numbers. But the signs are not only in the UK and the US. There are active debates in the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Italy about the numbers of foreign students and about the trend to offer more programmes in English to accommodate them.

In another article the same authors report on the dramatic changes taking place in China, which are not, in their view, attracting sufficient attention in the rest of the world, despite China’s huge role as both as a sender and receiver of students. Key aspects of the changes, following the removal of term limits for Xi Jinping and a large increase in his powers, are tightening of the Internet and greater control of the Web, a larger role for the Communist Party in university governance, and attacks on attempts to introduce US-style liberal education.

Other countries have accordingly become more suspicious of China’s influence in their jurisdictions, notably the role of the 480 Confucius Institutes worldwide, attempts to bias the work of Australian scholars on China, and the browbeating of a UK publisher to remove material from its website (since restored). In sum, the Chinese authorities are increasingly trying to interfere overseas, with growing pushback by Western academics and institutions.

The contrary case – for continued brisk growth in learner mobility – is made by Alex Usher from Canada (a country that is seeing double-digit annual increases in foreign enrolments

thanks to the problems in the UK and the US). Usher argues that the decreases in foreign students are less serious than is claimed. The problems, he argues, 'are confined to European countries a) which are relatively small players internationally and b) whose international student bodies are primarily European. In fact, one might even suggest that to the extent there is a crisis, it exists precisely where the financial model for internationalisation rests on the willingness of a host government to subsidise foreign students indefinitely on the same basis as domestic ones.'

Fees are a key element in the public perception of learner mobility. However, since governments within the European Union cannot charge differential fees for students from other EU countries it is natural that countries which are net importers of EU students face the perception that they are in competition with domestic students.

Usher observes that the ten countries with the largest numbers of international students are mostly trying hard to increase their numbers and 'by and large are succeeding in doing so'. He concludes that institutions in the UK and the US desperately want to see more international students, but their efforts are being damaged by 'governments which are desperately unpopular that may well be replaced in the very near future'.

Conclusion: weaving it all together

To conclude, in this talk I have purposely stood back from the issues of implementation of new digital technologies that have dominated our conference on the Groningen Declaration Network. I have done so because my long experience of university leadership has taught me that successful innovation must start from an accurate reading of the context in which the institution is operating. This context includes government policy, public attitudes, staff perception, finance and multiple other elements.

It struck me as soon as I saw the conference programme that calling this an *Age of Opportunity for Privacy, Trust and Learner Mobility* neglected important contemporary trends that run counter to this optimistic assessment. Please do not lose your idealism for allowing students to carry their qualifications with them in a secure manner. But remember that the implementation of the Groningen Declaration will require you to overcome many challenges before you can fully reap the opportunities.

I wish you well in that great endeavour!