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A Changing World: Expectations of Higher Education

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Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.
Franklin Pierce Adams (1889-1960)

Introduction

It is a pleasure to address you. Kimberley Strassel has talked about the particular challenges that higher education in the US changes faces from the changes here. For me, a Canadian with European roots, that would have been a tough assignment.

Following the Canadian election in 2015 and the recent US election these two North American countries are now on remarkably different trajectories. A recent article in a British newspaper called Canada 'the world's first postnational state'.

The Economist suggested not long ago that, 'liberty has moved north'. Canada's inclusive patriotism, its lack of a core identity and a mainstream, its broadly shared liberal values and its functional constitution and system of government are making these two countries very different. Events of recent days have put these differences in stark relief.

But it's a big world out there. There are alarming changes in many countries. I shall look at their implications for higher education from a broad perspective. And let's not forget that most of the world's people are simply living their lives as best they can without much attention to the issues that preoccupy the commentariat in the West.

My title is *A Changing World: Expectations of Higher Education*. I shall make four points about the changing world and four more on what higher education might do about them.

I apologise to the philosophers among you if I skate lightly over the thin ice of some complex issues.

Expectations of higher education

Point number one. A worrying feature of today's world is that people may have reduced expectations of higher education. The vocabulary of higher education is tarnished. I give three examples.

Expert

The Brexit campaign in the UK made 'expert' a dirty word. It told people to disbelieve expert projections about the impact of Brexit, whether from economists at the Bank of England, newspaper columnists or diplomats with an understanding of European affairs.

Some Brexiteers rejoiced at the recent resignation of the UK's representative in Brussels, Sir Ivan Rogers, who knows more about the relationship between the UK and the EU than anyone. In his farewell letter to his 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".

That is a perfect summary of my message in this talk. The business of higher education is to produce experts in all fields of human endeavour. We must teach them well and train them to use their expertise confidently and fearlessly. The new challenge that they face is to do all that in 140 characters! Rogers' advice fits just within those limits!

Elite

Another word that must go into cold storage is 'elite'. I shall return to this when I come to populism. Here I merely observe that much of today's acrimonious discourse is members of one elite slagging off members of another elite. Elite universities need another descriptor.

Trust

My last example is that this squabbling erodes trust. In his book *Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, Francis Fukuyama argued persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly 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.

Last year's vicious campaigns to UK and US voters were deeply corrosive of trust, although here in the US public trust in government has been declining for 50 years. Sadly, restoring trust is much harder than undermining it.

In short, 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 universities. Before we can satisfy expectations of higher education in a changing world we must articulate afresh what those expectations should be and campaign for them to be understood. Where do we start?

Post-Truth societies

Let's start with truth - my second point. 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."

Clearly, 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."

Progress

I turn now to point three: progress. Much of today's political turbulence reflects a loss of belief in progress. Yet 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 nostaligic 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."

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 the 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 will continue despite occasional setbacks or bad choices.

Populism

The final trend that I must mention is populism. Populism had some honourable antecedents in 19th century America. Today, sadly, it seems to combine most of the features that I've mentioned: nostalgia for the good old days, 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.

Again I recommend an excellent short book that explores the history and current manifestations of populism: *The Populist Explosion* by US journalist John Judis. I shall not attempt a summary, except to mention his distinction between contemporary populist movements of the right and left.

An earlier description by Michael Kazin called populism "a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class; view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic and seek to mobilize the former against the latter".

Judis takes this further. Leftwing populism does assume an antagonism between the people and an elite at the heart of its politics. By contrast social democratic, liberal or progressive politics seeks instead to reconcile opposing interests and groups.

Rightwing populists, on the other hand, champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist of immigrants and other minorities.

As he summarizes it: leftwing populism is dyadic - the bottom and middle arrayed against the top. Rightwing populism is triadic. It looks upward, but also downward on an out-group.

Examples of both types are all too evident today: the US had rightwing and leftwing versions in last year's election campaign, exemplified by Trump and Sanders respectively. The same distinction is true in Europe between the rightwing National Front in France and the leftwing Podemos and Syriza in Spain and Greece.

Judis concludes that populist campaigns often function as warning signs of a political crisis. There are plenty of political crises about in the world and higher education's graduates will have to live through them and address them.

Ends and Means

How should higher education prepare these graduates? I suggest two inter-related aims and two inter-related means of achieving them.

The first aim is to get students to position themselves on today's emerging political spectrum. The old political divisions of left and right, that determined the designs of many parliament chambers, are no longer as relevant today. The salient divide now is between open and closed. We can draw a new continuum and position traditional political views between these two extremes.

Some societies have decided to become more closed. It's too early to know how President Trump's wall between the US and Mexico will pan out - maybe with one between the US and Canada to follow - but we have already seen the UK vote for partial withdrawal from the world by leaving the European Union. Populist politicians who stress the differences between 'us' and 'them' are making plenty of running, creating a global reflex appeal to fear, nourished in part by terrorists for whom the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is a pretext for murder and violence.

But these are most likely temporary setbacks. Johan Norberg demonstrates that on measures of freedom, openness and equality the long-term trends are all positive. Moreover, the fundmental driver of progress has always been education. The young and not so young people coming out of the world's schools and universities will ensure that we continue to progress.

Higher education should challenge its students to position themselves along this continuum from 'open' to 'closed'. We should not tell them where to position themselves but, as Rector 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.

Institutions themselves might aspire to the 50-year old slogan of The Open University: open to people; open to places; open to methods; open to ideas.

Closely related is the continuum between inclusiveness and exclusiveness.

As former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson once said: 'How can there be peace without people understanding each other; and how can this be if they don't know each other?'

I have the privilege of chairing, *pro bono,* the international board of the United World Colleges; a system of residential senior secondary schools in 17 countries. We

deliberately select diverse cohorts of pupils from over 150 countries on a needs-blind basis to spend two years with us studying for the International Baccalaureate.

It is a powerful response to Lester Pearson's challenge.

To judge by the red-carpet welcome given to our UWC diplomates at universities - not least with full scholarships at a hundred good universities here in the US - it works. One reason why universities recruit our UWC diplomates so eagerly is that they get thoroughly stuck in to campus life and act as catalysts for inclusion and teamwork within the whole student body.

So, how can higher education help students to position themselves on the continua between open and closed and between exclusiveness and inclusiveness?

One approach is deliberately to recruit diverse student bodies and to be proactive in exploiting that diversity.

Another, mentioned by Rector Ottersen, is less teaching and more debate so that students can challenge each other and themselves. Graduates should leave university with an ingrained attitude of systematic scepticism. I was proud when a graduate told me that after studying with the Open University he couldn't see fewer than six sides to any question!

Much of this can also be done equally well online. I confess that I'm a MOOCs junkie and have just finished my 17th MOOC. It was on *Taoism and Western Culture* on the FutureLearn platform, which is particularly good at encouraging discussion. This course certainly challenged my pre-existing views about both Chinese and Western culture and I posted discussion items as never before. A classroom course would not have had the same impact on me.

Conclusion

So, let me conclude. For most of the world's population the Good Old Days are now. Our challenge is to help people see that. We must never stop explaining why truth, trust and knowledge are the foundations of successful societies. This means less didactic teaching and more debating of issues and positions between students. Online learning will be a powerful tool once faculty appreciate its power.

Finally, if people are to live together in peace it helps if they know each other and have at least tried to understand each other. Higher education can make a huge contribution to this if, instead of taking it for granted, it uses the diversity of the student body as a wonderful opportunity for learning and teaching.