

ANTIVARSITY

(Richard Forsyth, October 2012)

A university is:

- a place where monks can illuminate manuscripts and pray for the souls of the dead;
- a place where young males from wealthy families can be shown how to behave like 'gentlemen';
- an establishment where young adults can be turned into corporate executives at public expense;
- an institution where students can obtain qualifications that enable them to enter well-paid jobs that don't involve heavy lifting;
- a device for making intelligent people do stupid things;
- somewhere that adolescents can get drunk, get laid and get a degree -- often though not necessarily in that order;
- a subsidiary component in the portfolio of a global educational-technology corporation;
- a franchise whose brand image must be assiduously cultivated by well-paid marketing consultants;
- a means of improving the balance of payments by extracting hard currency from legions of overseas students;
- a refuge from the harsh realities of life;
- a participant in an international sporting contest whose goal is to rise up the league tables compiled by the Times Higher Education Supplement;
- a mechanism for keeping down the unemployment figures;
- an engine of national economic supremacy;
- an institution dedicated to passing on existing knowledge and encouraging new discoveries;
- none of the above.

If you believe that the penultimate item in the list above is or -- more to the point -- should be the best description, you may be someone shares my level of disillusionment with the present state of (so-called) higher education. I have spent more than four decades kicking around in universities, and formerly polytechnics, in three continents and I still haven't found a way of making an honest living in them.

The regularity with which the ideals of pedagogy and/or intellectual inquiry are trumped by expediency, at all levels in the system, is truly depressing. Just as the modern premier-league footballer can scarcely ever resist the opportunity of

sacrificing sportsmanship to success, so the professional in a modern university will almost always put career advancement before academic integrity. Putting bums on seats, getting grants, churning out publications, rising up various league tables -- those are the things that really motivate the chief decision-makers in the university sector. For an entertaining exposé of some of the ills that afflict education in the electronic era, read the perceptive [pedagogical parable](#) by Keith Hopper.

Can this sorry state of affairs be improved? Organizations like the [Campaign for Real Education](#) already exist, but they are aimed principally at school level, and perhaps unduly in thrall to the idea of 'standards', which leads to an excessive concern with examinations. In my view, exams, grades and tests should be secondary issues. Working out which students have done relatively well and which relatively poorly doesn't help improve the system. If we were providing good education, assessment would almost take care of itself; since we aren't, various fudges have to be adopted, explicitly or otherwise.

Throughout history, universities, and other institutions dedicated to preserving and expanding humanity's store of knowledge, have gone through periods of obscurantism and pedantry. Decadence is a normal phase. Personally, however, I'd like to find a way of shortening the current decadent phase, or at least reducing its impact.

I doubt that the answer lies in setting up competing institutions or fresh universities with well-meaning mission statements. All institutions sooner or later acquire an impetus towards self-preservation that takes precedence over any noble aims they may have begun with. So setting up a new university, or even a new kind of university, with a pure vision is not the answer. What I think would help is a kind of 'loyal opposition' -- a ginger group of gadflies -- in other words, a group of like-minded individuals whose role would be to criticize universities, from an agreed standpoint, and remind them pointedly, and as publicly as possible, of where they have fallen short of ideals they profess to espouse (or ought to espouse). Such a group might need something resembling a constitution, which is where problems could start to creep in; still, it might be worth trying to outline a succinct statement of what universities should and shouldn't be doing -- with a view to having some sort of consistent rationale for any critiques.

If anyone feels motivated to put a little effort into forming a coalition of concerned individuals along such lines, please feel free to get in touch with me at the address given on my home page. Perhaps we could set up a web presence....

antiversity dot org ??