

Guest editorial

David Atkinson

The future of universities: view from the top

Introduction

The idea for this special issue of *On the Horizon* grew out of the Triennial Conference of the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) held virtually from Mexico City in 2021. Focusing as it did on the post-pandemic university, the conference drew participants from around the world who addressed the impact of the COVID pandemic on universities and how universities might learn from the experience of the last several years in shaping themselves for the future. Obvious in these deliberations was that perspectives on what the pandemic means for individual universities significantly differ. This issue of *On the Horizon* includes some of these presentations along with invited papers from senior university leaders representing several countries and kinds of universities.

What can be said generally can certainly be said of universities. The pandemic was an event no one in living memory had experienced and one in which the eventual outcome still remains unclear. In a matter of weeks, universities from around the world closed down and moved to virtual delivery at every operational level. The challenges and obstacles were unprecedented for students, faculty and staff, and administrators alike, many of whom were ill prepared for life in a virtual world. The question remains whether these changes will be short lived as universities return to traditional campus-focused activities or whether they will result in permanent changes in how universities operate and are perceived.

Further complicating matters is that universities are already having to respond to a world where traditional values are being eroded and where often people are insecure about their future. We face problems that seem insurmountable – a fraying geopolitical order, environmental degradation, poverty and famine, the demise of truth and the decline of liberal democratic values. In this context, universities are continually being challenged about their role in society and about the values they espouse. According to Canada's *National Post*, universities are among those institutions subjected to a “chronic rage” that seems intent on tearing everything down. The university as an independent entity faces increased scrutiny from government and the public who seem intent on taking away the freedoms that have allowed the university to flourish for centuries as the one institution dedicated to a free exchange of ideas.

Over the years, there has been a myriad of publications focusing on the shortcomings and the precariousness of universities. Indeed, it has become a major publication industry, and this current issue of *On the Horizon* might well be accused of being part of this obsession. It seems, though, that universities are at a crossroads. Having confronted increasing challenges over the last decade or so, the COVID pandemic has, if anything, highlighted both the weaknesses and the strengths of universities, and placed focus on what should be retained from the past, learned from the present and changed in the future.

As much, however, as we worry about where universities are going, there is comfort in knowing that this is not the first time in history when universities were challenged. Many are the gloomy voices that over the years announced their imminent demise. Often quoted are George Roche and his claim that universities do little more than reflect the “rootlessness and self-doubt” of society at large or Bill Reading and his dark observation that we have reached

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the twilight of the University's critical and social function". But always universities survive, perhaps because they are the one place left where, despite threats to the contrary, they remain committed to protecting what is the best of our past even as they are important catalysts for change.

If anything, the current pandemic has refocused attention on students, and especially undergraduate students. This is hardly surprising given that students bore the brunt of the pandemic. We have been reminded that universities would not exist without undergraduates. Declining enrolment numbers have highlighted that student tuition pays for the university and have generated an increased concern about the quality of undergraduate education. There is renewed awareness that universities have taken the wrong path in relegating teaching to a secondary status after research and scholarship. The COVID pandemic did considerable to reverse this trend. Most faculty had little experience with virtual learning but had to invest the time and energy in stepping up if universities were to flourish. If anything, this has re-established undergraduate teaching as the university's most important responsibility. Before the pandemic, Coates and Morrison observed that "the global university system needs a reset"; it would seem we are now at that place.

The papers in this issue are contributed by a number of senior administrators. The first paper contributed by Fernando Leon Garcia, current President of CETYS University in Baja, Mexico, and President of the International Association of Presidents (IAUP) provides an overview of several recent surveys of university presidents/rectors concerning the impact of the pandemic on higher education, including a survey conducted by IAUP. Striking is the lack of unanimity about the future concerning how universities must change and whether, in fact, they ought to change or will change. Also included are two case studies, one contributed by Alan Davis, President of Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey, British Columbia; and the other by Devorah Lieberman, President of La Verne University in California, which recount how their universities pivoted quickly during lockdown. They stress how they were driven by an abiding concern for student wellbeing which, they insist, must continue to shape the future of their institutions.

The leadership role of the President during the pandemic goes without saying although perhaps lost in current discussion is the moral leadership that Presidents must exhibit in times of crisis. Melanie Humphreys, President of King's University in Edmonton Canada, reminds us of this, stressing as she does how courage in times of adversity must remain at the forefront of a President's role. Along similar lines, Nicolette Deville, former President of Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania, insists that academic leadership is the most important part of a President's job and expresses concern how this role has largely been abandoned.

Universities retain, of course, their responsibility as agents of change. Pam Fredman, former Rector of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, and current President of the International Association of Presidents; and Gerald Reisinger, Rector of the Upper Austria University of Applied Sciences, and Martin Gaisch, Professor of Linguistics at Upper Austria University, discuss the role of universities in furthering the sustainable development agenda while John Corlett, Vice-President (Academic) and Provost of the University of Winnipeg and MacEwan University in Canada focuses on the role of universities in a post-truth world where universities are often under attack and need to provide leadership in world where truth is often ignored or massaged to fit political agendas.

It is not to be forgotten, however, that universities and their Presidents have very real challenges. Ricardo Mairal-Usón, Rector of the Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia in Spain, provides, as leader of the largest distance delivery university in Europe, a discussion of the practicalities which universities must confront. And finally, we are reminded by Salam Al-Mahadin, President of Middle East University, that universities are being challenged in other than Europe and North America, as they try to retain their autonomy and map out their own futures.

Unmistakable in these papers is how much they focus, both directly and indirectly, on the role of the University President, and beg the question of the role of University Presidents in the future. Several years ago Neil Gluckman discussed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* the report of the Aspen Institute's Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency. Striking was how much that was said is found in *A Primer for a President*, written nearly 30 years earlier by Peter Flawn, President Emeritus of the University of Texas at Austin. Together they beg the question of whether much has actually changed over the years notwithstanding that the world has moved on from 1997. Given this, we might ask the question "Will things change for Presidents in the future and by how much?"

One might read endlessly, and be no closer to answering this question? The position of President is a job where you do not know what it is until you are actually in it, and this is likely to become more so. Many have observed that being a university President is the most difficult job in modern society given the President's responsibilities to a multiplicity of stakeholders all of whom have a sense of ownership over the institution. The demands of these stakeholders will only increase in the future with the result that those occupying these positions will be challenged by an ever more complicated job with unprecedented elements of stress and anxiety. The challenges for universities over the past couple of years have left many feeling vulnerable and unsure about the future. Those who work in universities – faculty and staff alike – will look for strong, definitive leadership.

In his book, *Leadership Under Fire*, Ross Paul, past President of the University of Windsor, describes the university as organized anarchy with a multiplicity of purposes that are not mutually consistent, what he calls a series of ill-defined preferences. Universities are many things to many people, and in this context, we should be reminded that Presidents possess little independent academic authority and that for many universities legal and fiduciary authority rest with the Board. There is lots of evidence to suggest that boards in the future will increasingly interfere on issues that they have hitherto ignored placing enormous stress on the President to provide guidance and direction.

Universities in the future will be ever more about profile, reputation and branding. Post-secondary education is a competitive business as universities compete with one another for students, public funding and research support. Preoccupation with rankings and the status they bring are not going away soon. What a university is or what it becomes is very much the business of the community in which it resides. Often it is the largest employer in a community, and enriches in so many ways the life of the broader community.

Governments will increasingly see universities as economic drivers, and will measure their success accordingly. Every few years, governments will mount system-wide reviews of higher education with the implication, not that it is doing a good job, but that somehow it is deficient. Significantly, the universities and their leaders will often have no say in these reviews. Students and their parents will be ever more anxious that they are getting value for dollar, and quality assurance programs of one sort or another have become the norm.

Perhaps more than anything else today, resources and money will be all consuming. Gone from public universities is the assumption that the government grant will increase year over year. Raising money is often front and centre in any advertisement for a new President, and it is perhaps the thing for which they are perhaps least prepared. Fundraising is a complex thing, especially in institutions where there is a limited tradition of doing so. A feature of modern university life is that Presidents are often judged by their ability to raise money, and raising money is an inevitable fact of being a President today.

Despite all this, two things must remain top of mind for any President in the future – the institution's academic mission and its students. If there is one thing to remember above all else, the President is the academic leader of the University. This does not mean that the President is omnipresent in shaping academic program; rather the President must first and foremost speak for the academic mission of an institution and give it primacy of place. Of

course, the group that is most important is the students. Without students there is no university, and students are what shapes the university. A President must make the time for students. They will become increasingly more demanding, and one must be genuinely interested in their concerns and exhibit respect for their opinions.

It is mantra for Presidents that they “listen, learn, and lead”. The one thing that does not change is that the President is the one responsible; they will be held accountable when things go wrong even as they must always give credit to others when things go well. Unfair, maybe, but also something that is part of a President’s reality.

It is difficult to say where universities will be in 20 or 30 years. What we can say is that they will still be here. After all, they have withstood no end of challenges over their 1,000-year history. But the world is changing rapidly. Educational expectations are being transformed, as universities are increasingly catalysts for change. The real challenge will be to protect and nurture the defining qualities of a university while allowing them to be responsive in real time to real needs.

As much as universities are responsive to the changing needs of their students and society generally, certain cornerstones of the past must remain as a foundation for the future. Increasingly, academic freedom is being curtailed and characterized as something that lacks accountability. One often hears the criticism of how faculty are free to do whatever they wish and get paid for it. Such sentiment demonstrates a profound ignorance. As we live in a world so taken with “false truth” and “spoke culture”, there must remain a place where difficult questions can be asked without recrimination and free from political correctness – this cannot change even as universities must adjust to a new reality. This is as it has always been and must remain so in the future. Here I am reminded of something I wrote 30 years ago for a volume interestingly called *Value and the University*. What I wrote still applies today:

The refrain of the marketplace is “do more better with less”, and it is heard more and more in the university. To most academics, it is an anathema to what they perceive universities to be; universities want to grow along with the knowledge they uncover. But if the universities wish to retain independence from the social and political agenda, and thereby retain some remnant of their traditional role in society, then they must move half way: some sort of accommodation must be reached between the university as a vehicle that responds to society’s needs and the university that criticizes society, and that, as in Socrates; cave, shines light on ignorance and misconception. One must not only talk of the need for revitalization and new direction [...]. This is the challenge in front of the university, and indeed it is in this challenges that the university will define its values.

On the one hand, the university must justify its existence by stressing its instrumentality – in other words, it has an economic value. Peter Dooley in the same volume says the obvious when he writes, “the growing demand for post-secondary education is an objective measure of the economic value of the university to society”. On the other hand, the university must remain impervious to exactly this, the belief being that truth has no instrumental value.

This debate has been with us from a very long time. It was, after all, Kant who claimed that the aim of philosophy is to influence and even shape the three “higher faculties” – medicine, law and theology. It does so by aspiring to root everything in truth, which is the essential condition of learning. As I have discussed elsewhere, universities are driven by rival beliefs between a commitment to truth and learning in itself and a responsibility to enhance the society which supports it. Universities are no longer about the privileged few, and the more people who gain access to universities and what they represent the better the world will be.

In the midst of all this, we would be wise to see the recent pandemic as only one example of what will be our future. No one anticipated it, and to this day we are unsure from where it came. This is the new reality. The world changes so rapidly and in so many unanticipated ways that there is little stability and security. As we have seen from the pandemic, there is a powerful cynicism that leaves us wondering what to believe. Accordingly, then, that

universities must exhibit the courage necessary to counter the misinformation and chaos which surrounds us.

We have just come through a pandemic that has turned the world on end, and this includes universities. This has only exacerbated the challenge of defining the university's purpose. The one thing we do know, however, is that universities must address the future with confidence even as they remain keenly aware of the pitfalls that have long been part of their existence. The challenges of the future will be enormous. But as they have always done in the past, universities will rise to the challenge. There is too much at stake if they do not. There will be endless talking and debating, but from this universities will gain the strength to sustain their role in society.

The papers in this issue of *On the Horizon* aim in varying ways to consider this future and what it means even as there is the recognition that one cannot presume to know everything about what the future might entail. One thing is, however, clear from these papers: it is unthinkable to think of a world where the role of universities is diminished. By way of conclusion, I wish to thank those of my colleagues who contributed to this issue, and express special appreciation to Dr John Moravec, General Editor of *On the Horizon*, for his advice and guidance.

Further readings

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