The digital revolution: can the university survive? Yes and no!

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Themes of this conference

- Transformation of
  - Universities as institutions
  - Teaching
  - Student learning/ student experience
  - The ‘classroom’

- Concerns about technology – reliability, trust, transparency.
My approach

• Standing back
• Overview
• Argument – a thesis
• Theoretical? - but nothing so practical as a good theory
• I shall tread on some toes – but fairly gently
• I also want to offer a vision, even a utopian vision.
The conference question

- ‘How can universities reinvent themselves in order to cope with the societal impact of digital transformation?’
- Note ‘societal’ – just what is the societal impact – or societal impacts
- I’ll offer my own thoughts here
- But 2 further questions:
  - What is the relationship between (a) the emergence of the digital era in society on the one hand and (b) the coming of the digital university?
  - NB: (b) doesn’t follow from (a)!
  - What are the societal possibilities for the digitised university?
My thesis

• The emergence of the digital era is real
• And is having profound impact upon the university
• Not only on materials, technologies, modes of inquiry and learning
• Responses: bleakness and optimism
• Profound bleak possibility
• Perhaps the university is becoming a *thought-free zone*?
• But the digital age is opening quite new possibilities for the univ
• Both in its internal affairs and in its engagement with society
• There is much to play for.
Two opposed camps:
1 – the proseltizers

- Governments/ cross-national agencies/ institutional leaders/ think tanks
- Of course, the digital revolution has to be embraced
- And with enthusiasm
- It can transform learning, teaching, the student experience
- Who could not be in favour of it?
- Those who raise critical questions are dinosaurs
- Who are being left behind
- and are on the wrong side of history
- Let us just get on with the revolution.
2 The naysayers

• Different positions
• The digital revolution
• Is a mirage – always with us
• Isn’t coming – the university today is much as it was in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century
• Isn’t wanted even by students – lecture halls are still full
• Is pernicious
Just an example – learning analytics

The proselytizers:

- Reducing attrition rates
- Improving efficiency
- Make possible the digital university
- Reducing recurrent and overhead costs
- Monitoring students
Learning analytics – the naysayers

- Monitoring students!
- Lack of consultation
- Unethical
- Manipulation – both by management and by the students themselves
- Damages the pedagogical relationship (akin to the doctor-patient relationship being monitored)
- An example of ‘new public management’
- And instrumental reason
A plague on both your houses

- Neither group has it right
- & neither group is to be trusted
- & both have limited agendas

- (However, perhaps the naysayers listen to the proselytizers
- And critique them
- But the proselytizers seldom address their critics?)
Where’s the idea of the university?

*Both – proselytizers and naysayers - work within narrow frameworks*

- *The proselytizers* – little critical reflection:
  - ‘Are there disbenefits here?’
    - Question isn’t asked
  - Little consideration of ‘the idea of the university’
- *The naysayers*:
  - Look back to a golden age that never was
  - Fail to consider its (new) possibilities and responsibilities in the C21
  - We all need to keep revisiting the question:
    - what is a university – and what is it and what should it be in the C21?
The university in a digital age

- In the digital age, the university is connected/ networked with the world
  - Whether it understands this or not
- And the world itself is inter-connected
  - School children in India, China and Africa are connected with the world
- What is the university’s response?
  - This matter is not seriously being addressed
- For 900 years, the university occupied a definite place – a building
  - Now it is (in) a global space
- What are its new possibilities in this situation?
  - What are the university’s responsibilities?
The global and networked university

• **Examples of possible developments/ possibilities**
  
  • *Research and scholarship:*
    • International cooperation (and more mutual understanding)
    • New ecologies of inquiry – networks spanning academic/ corporate/ political spheres as well as West/East and North/South
  
  • *Teaching and learning*
    • Cross-national classrooms
    • The ‘flipped classroom’
  
  • *Outreach*
    • Global conversations (Prof Michael Sandel – ‘The Public Philosopher’)
    • Research data available on-line
A world of alternative facts and cyber manipulation

• Human understanding is not freely developed
• Especially from the 1930s
• But now, the digital age brings new powers of cognitive manipulation
  • (Many examples, not only in USA and the UK)
• So the university now has new responsibilities
• But also new possibilities – of reaching out to the world
• The university – interests in learning, understanding, inquiry
  • Now those interests can be shared with the world.
The university and the public sphere

- The idea of the public sphere
- Crucial to a democracy
- Now threatened – discourses and debate narrows/ closes
- The digital age – new responsibility on the university
- To play its part in widening the public sphere
  - And developing public understanding of issues
  - And increasing the flow of ideas
    - And the growth of critical thought
The idea of the university - again

• In the digital age, the idea of the university has to be rethought – again
• Nothing less
• Difficult, not easy
• Requires imagination, even a utopian imagination
  • & a critical understanding of the world
• The university can fulfil its traditional functions but in totally new ways
• Problem: requires independence but universities now incorporated into political agendas.
• So just at the moment new possibilities open, the space for the university is diminished. (Witness many countries of the world.)
Leadership in a digital age

Requires:
- A programme of continuous and deep learning – do Rectors read?
- Imagination
- Concern for the university
- But also the world
- And the university in the (digital) world
- Vision – and even utopian thinking
- A global ethics
- Capacities not just for action
- But also for working with all to help institutional understandings of (a) challenges; (b) responsibilities; (c ) possibilities
Conclusion ‘The digital university: can the university survive? Yes and no!’

- The university is on a cusp
- It is not – as some say – in ruins.
- But it is at a critical junction
- Does it succumb to the digital age uncritically?
- Or does it seek seriously to understand the world
- And *fearlessly* work out its responsibilities and its possibilities.
- Yes, the university can survive
  – but it requires a quite new understanding of leadership
- Which comprehends the difficulties
  - and imaginatively glimpses possibilities