Foreword

There are two key questions each university should be able to answer about its academic work. The first is: ‘What are we good at?’ And the second is: ‘What are we good for?’

The first question is the more common one. Almost every university in the world responds to it, typically by enumerating some disciplines or fields of study in which they believe they distinguish themselves, through knowledge creation, or application, or dissemination. Because it is easier to measure, the response to the ‘good at’ question often becomes a reference to knowledge creation, which means research, and thus to publications, citations, conferences, impact factors and h-indices. This leads to an academic world of research assessments and metrics, and a public representation of universities in terms of rankings and league tables.

This book is concerned with the second, less often asked question. It is welcome, and timely, and necessary. Amidst the public focus on league tables we still need to ask: ‘What are universities for?’ ‘What benefit do they bring to civil society, and how?’

To this question academics have long had a ready answer, which is that in the knowledge economy we may trust in the workings of an invisible hand. Knowledge created for its own sake will on the whole and in the end bring benefit to society. Of this, many examples can be given, enough to consider the case empirically proven. Many academics and universities therefore believe they can with good reason focus on what they are good at: the creation and dissemination of knowledge for its own sake.

This is true, but it is not the whole truth. The workings of the invisible hand can be terribly slow and maddeningly unpredictable. You never quite know whether or when it will get round to addressing a particular need or problem faced in a community or society.

A fuller and more direct answer to the ‘good for’ question comes when academics position themselves not only on the supply side but also on the demand side of the knowledge economy. Curiosity-driven research lies on the supply side, but it is on the demand side of the knowledge economy where we find issues and problems that require knowledge generation for a particular purpose. There are, for example, the grand challenges facing global society: global warming, loss of biodiversity, pandemics, poverty,
war, fundamentalism – it is a long list. On a different scale but equally real are problems faced by local communities: the loss of an industrial base, or poor schools, or unemployment. Or we may think of cities, and issues of urban sustainability, such as energy, transport, water and waste. Such questions require knowledge; not just the application of existing knowledge, which is often trapped within disciplinary silos, but the creation of new knowledge in response to a particular societal issue.

We begin to respond to the ‘good for’ question when knowledge creation and dissemination become responsive to societal need. When such responsiveness becomes an ambition in itself, and a driving force of academic work, we get to the idea of a civic university. And so, essentially, a civic university is one that is able to articulate, clearly and accurately, how it puts academic excellence to work in responding to the needs and demands of society. A civic university knows not only what it is good at but also what it is good for.

As the editors of this book (who are also chapter authors) point out, the idea of civic engagement is not new. In looking at the historical origins of the civic university, and its international context, we find a number of examples, from the redbrick universities in the industrial cities of the north of England to the land-grant universities in the United States of America. Part of the historical narrative is that there was also a phase when the original idea of civic responsibility faded away, and universities focused almost entirely on the supply side of the knowledge economy. With this book we may hope – cautiously – that the wheel is now turning again, and that the value of demand-side work through civic engagement is increasingly being recognised across the university sector.

While we may argue that there is a common philosophy, the overview also shows that the idea of a civic university has different manifestations. This is no bad thing; at least not to those of us who believe that diversity is a strength. It does, however, leave the producers of a book about the idea of a civic university with a methodological choice. They could, for example, do an empirical study of some likely candidate universities, and then try to extract some common themes. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they could adopt a normative approach, which is essentially to offer their own definition and then challenge the likely candidates to measure up to it.

Bravely, the author-editors here adopt the normative approach. They give a definition of the contemporary civic university in terms of seven ‘dimensions’ which are, in their view, ‘best practice characteristics’, and then look at the extent to which eight universities in four countries meet this characterisation. I say ‘bravely’ because on a normative approach the author-editors offer up their definition of a civic university to the scrutiny
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of the reader just as much as they themselves subject the candidate universities to scrutiny. The reader is thus invited not only to consider what these seven ‘dimensions’ say, but also what they do not say. The seventh ‘dimension’, for example, is about the adoption of innovative methodologies, which would arguably open the civic university door to the virtual universities of the internet. On the other hand, there is no ‘dimension’ that considers responding to the risks of adopting a civic approach. The biggest risk, of course, is that ‘civic university’ gets equated with ‘second-rate university’. When there is more to do on the demand side then perhaps less will be done on the supply side, and a drop in output will certainly be punished in the league tables. Inside the civic university there is the risk that some academics may see engagement as a convenient displacement activity for research and/or teaching, rather than being an integral part of it. No worthwhile endeavour is without risk, but it is useful to be conscious of what those risks are.

Fortunately, however, and in fairness, the eight universities are, within the ambit of the seven ‘dimensions’, allowed to speak for themselves. These case studies (and as a declaration of interest I should say I co-authored one of them) make for fascinating reading. The eight chapters authored by the universities are honest voices of experience, on a common theme, arising from a common conviction, but not shirking the difficulties they have encountered in positioning responsiveness to societal needs as a core academic purpose.

And so there really are multiple authors of this book. That they do not agree in all respects with each other, or indeed with the four principal author-editors, is in my view just another manifestation of diversity being a strength. There may again be different successful manifestations of the core idea of a civic university, as there has been before. Concepts are polished by contestation, and to this purpose we may invite also the attentions of the reader.

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