



| VIEWPOINT

## TOWARDS A TEACHING INTENSIVE CRITICALLY ENGAGED UNIVERSITY: FITNESS FOR PURPOSE IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY.

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In a post-industrialised modern world there can be little doubt about the importance of creating a highly-skilled and educated

workforce. The ever improving economies of China and India are producing degree graduates at an exponential, if not alarming, rate.

The ability of the former economic powers of the west to maintain their position at the top of the world's economic league tables relies heavily upon their ability to compete in a knowledge economy where research, development and innovation in cutting edge ideas and technologies provide the key to growth and prosperity. Modern universities are a fact of life in developed economies; they target high quality teaching, underpinned by appropriate scholarship and research. These new leaders in the mass higher education system have to take a different approach to the delivery of their services compared with those of the traditional, elite, higher education providers. When less than 5% of a developed economy's 18-year-olds gained access to universities, pure 'self-actualising' higher education for the elite relied upon time for independent study and reflection; honing and refining, as those elite selective universities did, and do, some of the finest minds on the planet. In a mass higher education system where participation rates of 18-year-olds exceed 40% and are rightly rising, old methodologies and elite academic discourse are entirely inappropriate vehicles for educating those with the potential but without the aptitude of the traditional scholar. In fact, business, industry and the future economy relies upon having an extensive provision of well-educated individuals who will not themselves seek to achieve the



modern equivalent of splitting the atom. They will instead ideally seek to spin out new business ventures, create new mass markets and enhance society as a whole. Graduates, it is a fact, make better public citizens as they participate more effectively in democracy, have better health records and are less of a burden on the State. The graduates to which I refer are not the elite code-breakers of MI6 but are, rather, the essential, valuable, modern citizen of a developed world. The forward looking modern critically engaged university seeks to recruit, retain, educate and make employable this specific cohort. It is the modern universities which, above all, will provide the economic sustenance of the developed world and will enable the once world-leading economies of the west to compete with those emerging in the Far East and the Indian subcontinent. So, the case is made,

the race to the top is on and only a whole new cadre of modern, critically engaged universities will meet this demand. The elite, the research intensive, Ivy League and Russell Group (as they are known by varying descriptors across the world) will undoubtedly continue to do an excellent job in their market segment; and whilst they might cure cancer, or create artificial consciousness with the downstream impact equivalent to the invention of the internet, or prolong life beyond reasonable expectation; they will not, by themselves, be sufficient to sustain our economies. A mass higher education system requires mass production methods — methods which are efficient and effective in delivering specific services and needs to a large and diverse client group. This client group has not necessarily experienced traditional, university style, higher education provision before, they are

unlikely to have parents who attended a higher education facility and are unlikely to have either realistic or well-founded expectations of what studying for a degree will entail. In some cases, they may have even been subject to peer group and societal pressure that “university is not for them”. Of course, this ill-informed pressure often emanates from those who have in their mind a model of a university which in the future, if not already, is out-dated, if not irrelevant.

So what is the new breed of Teaching Intensive (TI) modern, critically engaged university for? A TI university should seek to provide the best possible learning opportunities for its specific client group or professional field. A modern TI university should be focussed, above all, upon high quality teaching and learning opportunities. This would involve access to the latest educational mediums and a



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trained professional workforce of those skilled in educational methods; not simply experts in an academic discipline which they teach. Each member of staff needs to have a heightened awareness of their vital role in supporting those new to higher education. This requires highly-skilled individuals, who are themselves far more educationally savvy, who are able to understand the learning styles of each of their students and adapt their teaching and learning strategies accordingly. This is a mass system uniquely where one size does not fit all but the individual and peculiar needs of each learner have to be both identified and catered for on a mass scale in a way in which the old elite universities could never envisage. In essence, the elite universities have an intake of homogenous, elite academic athletes who are capable of jumping through hoops in examination and thus

have the bar continuously raised in their pursuit of world leading excellence. The modern TI universities of the future are about providing the relevant gym mats to break a fall, the relevant physiotherapy to put right an academic injury and pre-habilitation academic specialists who are able to identify an academic injury before it happens and know how to put in place systems to prevent students falling by the wayside. The TI university that provides intensive care for its vitally important learners, who themselves will provide the economy of the future with its essential driving force, has to be underpinned by the most advanced andragogy and pedagogy. World-leading subject research, whilst important, is less essential to this type of TI university and its students, save in the field of education itself of course. The modern TI university will provide the learning infrastructure and

teaching specialists to enable those new to higher education to flourish. It will allow multiple attempts at competency based assessments, celebrate success wherever it is found, reinforce opportunity, widen access and be blind to the background and resource capabilities of its student intake. The modern university of the future that is teaching intensive will welcome all who have the desire to learn and will provide curricula relevant to employment and industry with no thresholds or barriers to opportunity. The modern TI university of the future will be totally inclusive and will shy away from measures of elitism, possibly even removing degree classifications as an outmoded notion of elite excellence. Think about it, how out of date are degree classifications? In essence, one is either competent or one is not; who wants to be operated on by a surgeon graded with the equivalent of a UK 2ii

honours degree — unless that honours degree indicates absolute competence? In which case, if the 2ii honours level is evidence of competence, why is it not categorised as first class? Classifying degree outcomes is simply a label to reinforce elitism.

Creating a TI university of the type described in this paper is not a simple journey. For decades, if not centuries, the academic staff of universities has been trained to copy the model of the elite universities. The so-called university league tables themselves prioritise academic excellence, high entry grades, research standing and citations in internationally refereed journals. Many staff take the route to tenured professor for promotion; this is one which almost universally requires elite research activity and publication of learned papers; in all honesty, very few truly at the heart of the sector acknowledge teaching as the most challenging, rewarding and important aspect as the role of an academic in higher education. Few academics clamour to teach 1st year undergraduate introductory level programs, preferring in the main to supervise final year undergraduates, Masters students and PhDs. So the journey for the modern TI university is uphill, the first problem being to recruit, retain and motivate the very best academic staff who choose, above all else, to work in such a context, but moreover have a passion for teaching underpinned by, but not dominated by, subject specific research. Winning hearts and minds in a university system populated traditionally by those whose hearts were in elite research and whose minds are ironically often found to be closed to such new ideas, rather than

open, is a major leadership task faced in creating a TI university. Clearly the articulation of a vision of the system of the future and the importance it plays to the population and economy is the first step. It may, in truth, take generations for mindsets and attitudes to really change, the dominant elite in society having a vested interest in maintaining their position and thus they espouse the values of a boutique elite system of higher education. This needs to be broken because, without it, China and India will undoubtedly rule the economic world; itself possibly not a bad thing intrinsically. But, if the formerly world-leading developed nations are to try to retain their position of economic pre-eminence, they have to challenge their existing assumptions and the elite have to recognise that presiding over the decline of the Roman Empire in the name of 'standards' does them no good whatsoever. Teaching Intensive, Research Informed universities are without question the way forward, they will provide opportunities and challenge assumptions, create the workforce of the future and break the hold of the elite in a productive and effective manner for all. My own university in the UK leads the way as the first truly Teaching Intensive modern university where staff are engaged actively in supporting our learners in the manner described in this paper. The University of Bolton has unique links with further education (FE) in the UK through its own large general FE college and in many ways the FE college system has cracked the code for delivering quality teaching, albeit that the FE sector in the UK itself is woefully under-resourced. With the resource envelope for higher education in the UK being so much fuller, there can

be no excuse for poor quality teaching or poor student satisfaction with that teaching, and yet evidence from student surveys demonstrates that dissatisfaction is widespread in the elite research intensive universities.

Student satisfaction is a measure of how well the customers feel the provider is doing in helping them to achieve their aim with their valuable time and money. Evidence in the UK shows the research intensive universities to be failing even their elite students in respect of their levels of satisfaction. The converse is often true in the UK's modern universities. So, one is able to conclude that times need to change and are changing, that opportunities must be ever widened and that access should be encouraged to all who are willing to participate. The TI critically engaged university is the answer for the economies of the future, but achieving academic respectability thanks to the woefully conservative snobbery of the sector, if not society itself, will remain an uphill task for the foreseeable future. I for one relish that task. My passion is shared by the outstanding staff of my own university whom I am proud to work alongside in this endeavour.

*Professor George Holmes is President & Vice Chancellor of the University of Bolton. When appointed to the position in 2005 he became the youngest University Vice Chancellor in the United Kingdom.*





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