

13

Summing

Up

If you have managed to read through to this point, then you have probably discovered that universities are quite complex organisations, with complex internal structures and complex governance arrangements.

Students don't need to know everything about every aspect of universities in order to do well in an undergraduate course, but they do need to get a perspective on what universities stand for at their core. For this reason, at the beginning of this book, and at numerous points throughout, it has been emphasised that universities are fundamentally about learning – and that that learning applies not only to the students but to all the staff as well.

The question now is what, in the broadest sense, are all the university participants there to learn? Perhaps this question is best answered by a statement from Leo Tolstoy, who once said that,

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing themselves.”

If there was to be a simple summation of the outcomes of university learning, removed from all the complexities of structure, governance, courses, research and subjects, it would be this – people go to universities to learn about themselves, their capabilities and limitations, and how these can be used for the betterment of society. In other words, to provide a pathway to the advancement of society through genuine self-awareness.

Needless to say, the bulk of students that attend university do not primarily do so in order to gain self-awareness or any other form of spiritual enlightenment – rather, the majority of students merely

seek formal accreditation which will provide an entry point to professional employment. Some seek the prestige of a high profile university brand, and expect the magic dust of greatness to descend upon them when they receive their “branded” degree. For many people then, the university experience will be little more than a collection of rote-learned subjects, which are forgotten minutes or hours after the examinations have ended, and the accreditation degree has been awarded.

For those that view their university education purely as a vocational accreditation process, the university’s worth is little more than that of an “egg-board”, whose role is to put the stamp on the outside of eggs as they are packaged into cartons – the eggs that come out are identical to the eggs that go in, with the exception of the fact that they have been stamped with an accreditation. Along the way, the egg-board throws away a few eggs that it thinks are bad – without ever having actually examined or changed the contents of any of the ones that have passed through. Hence, for those that pass through the university system, and discover that their only reward has been to have an “ok” stamped on their forehead as they exit, there have been important opportunities wasted and lost.

It is only years or decades later, however, that some graduates discover that the formal accreditation accorded by a university is not a sprinkling of magic dust that leads to fulfilment or success – for there are many individuals who have become fulfilled and successful without ever having gained any formal educational accreditation. And, it is not the rote learning of formulae or theorems that leads to knowledge – for there are many knowledgeable people who have never had the benefit of a university education.

The real difficulty in understanding the benefits of university learning stems from understanding that universities are not established solely to provide vocational training – they have a much more subtle role, which is to broaden the mind by getting individuals to understand their own capabilities, strengths and limitations – and, more importantly, to understand the strengths and limitations of the environment in which they live. Of course, it is not only the students that have to grapple with this concept – many academics go through their entire careers without any sense of self-awareness, or any sense of their important role in inspiring students. And therein a basic problem lies.

In entering the university system, therefore, students need to make a commitment – not just to others but, more importantly, to themselves, that they will use their time to genuinely discover what they are capable of achieving, and how this can be used to change their society and environment for the better. Moreover, this commitment has to be made with the awareness that academics will not always be capable of inspiring or leading students through their journey of discovery – indeed a proportion of academics will endeavour to lead students down the easy pathway of rote-learning.

Somehow then, those students with a higher sense of purpose about their university learning need to transcend the shortcomings of their own academic leaders; transcend any rote learning structures that are imposed upon them, and self-motivate to become better than any intrinsic shortcomings of the system.

With these points in mind, and given the inherent weaknesses in the university system, we now ask what it is that the university system is actually providing to students in order to support them in

their learning journey? Obviously, there are basic, tangible elements such as bricks and mortar; learning structures, and learning tools (such as laboratories and libraries). But, if one has to summarise the three most important contributions that any university provides to the learning journey of an undergraduate, it would be these:

- *Time* – a three to six year period in which students are genuinely free to contemplate how they will make the transition from adolescence into adulthood, and how they will make their adult lives valuable – in other words, how they will change themselves in order to change the world by adding value to it.
- *Colleagues* – a collection of friends, peers and foes with whom students can share their ambitions; dreams and concerns and, above all, their journey of discovery.
- *Challenges* – not just those imposed in a simple academic sense but also life challenges associated with dealing with the shortcomings of the system, and one’s own limitations.

So, in a larger sense, it is not the choice of university or its prestige (or even the minutiae of the subject contents in a course) that are fundamental to what emerges from a university education in its broadest terms. It is what students do with one of the few periods in their lives where they are free to develop and grow as individuals so that they can adapt to take on the world’s challenges.

In the words of Jimmy Dean,

“I can’t change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination...”

The real objective of universities and university learning then is to enable students to understand the wind, and to understand how to adjust their sails to reach the life destination that they seek.