SYMPOSIUM

Chin Up; Chest Out; Don't Panic

Michael Laver, *New York University*

Chin up; chest out; don't panic, yet. Yes, we who work in universities do face epic challenges described eloquently by King and Sen. Yes, we have indeed mostly ignored these—or rather have tended to wring our hands and wail operatically before planting our heads deeply in the sand. We will certainly experience massive technological disruptions of our traditional modus operandi and have only dim notions about how to respond to these. And all of us, if we are brutally honest, are deeply complicit in contributing to an unsustainably rising cost curve that, unchecked, will blow apart the very system that currently sustains our comfortable lives. These sorry truths are self-evident.

But, and it is a big but, we still offer something *very* special—so special, in fact, that we find it hard to describe using mere words. Put crudely using a few of those mere words, we offer permissive, creative, and exciting intellectual campuses that place the highest possible value on having really smart people do blue skies research without any expectation of commercial return on the considerable investment required. Vast benefits to humanity have arisen from the resulting accretion of human knowledge and understanding over decades and generations. Every human and humane society needs cradles for intellectual development. Universities provide those cradles. A world without universities would be a much poorer place … a world in which few serious-minded people would freely choose to live. We all believe this, but we must strive tirelessly to find better ways to put that case.

Universities do much more than provide essential intellectual cradles. Modern societies have chosen to educate the best and the brightest of their young people in these very same intellectual campuses. Rather than gathering the researchers on one site and the teachers on another, we have evolved the profession of teacher-researcher, have called these people professors, and have corralled them in universities. And we do honestly believe, although we have to do a *much* better job of articulating this, that it is far better to educate young adults in a vibrant and eclectic intellectual campus patrolled by brilliant, inquisitive, undisciplined, and (not infrequently) ornery university professors than in specialist teaching academies staffed by finely honed and hyper-effective teachers. Whisper this quietly, but we are unreservedly prepared, and we are not wrong, to sacrifice (some) pure teaching effectiveness to expose students to (sometimes) shambolic but ferociously creative thinkers.

It gets even better. We offer something else that is unique and irreplaceable. We may not like to admit this to ourselves but universities offer a rite of passage for young adults as they move from being children and teenagers, ultimately dependent on their parents, to the self-sufficient grown-ups who form the basis of the next generation. Furthermore, in providing an attractive and exciting setting for this informal rite of passage, while simultaneously offering a more formal education, we are in an excellent position to identify the best and brightest for others who might want to hire them. We are not just research campuses and training or even education academies. We fulfill a crucial economic role in any society by socializing and grading young adults. Young adults will be socialized somehow, of course, whether they go to university or spend those same years in prison, down a coalmine, in the navy, or flipping burgers. *Mere* socialization is not the issue. But, by socializing young people while we educate them on a vibrant research campus, we contribute to a mindset that sees any new problem as susceptible to analysis using a portfolio of general intellectual skills that can be applied in as-yet undreamed of settings. This belief is why we do not join the philistines in arguing there is no value, for example, in a bright young person studying for a university degree in Latin, even setting aside the argument that knowing Latin helps you to understand and use most European languages more effectively. That university degree in Latin, well-taught, will build and reinforce a portable system of rigorous thinking that is valuable in many unanticipated contexts. Although it is amusing to sneer at the British Civil Service for its long tradition of recruiting Oxbridge classics scholars, the cream of the British Civil Service is justifiably regarded as being pretty darn good, and no evidence has been adduced that they would have been even better if only they had studied something "useful" at university.

To see this from another perspective, think of yourself as a big employer needing to hire a steady stream of talented and versatile young people. Who do you prefer—whiz-kids with stellar scores from the very best online courses and training mills, or graduates with good, even if not stellar, grades from top universities? I think you know the answer. This preference is at least in part because universities add value even without imparting any formal education at all. Think of the archetypical Oxbridge or Ivy League scallywag who regularly cuts class and does the absolute minimum necessary to avoid being thrown out, while spending the time drinking and/or playing sports, making music, acting, or running some political campaign. Professors may shake their heads and scold but, for the most part, the scallywags emerge from university better knowing their own talents and, more importantly, better knowing how to put these to good use.

In all of the debate about threats to the traditional university system in the United States arising from changes in the technological and economic contexts, little has been learned from the experience of the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom.[1] Since its founding in 1969 the OU has offered a path to a university education that does not depend on attending a university campus. It grants degrees that are highly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096512001758 Published online by Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S1049096512001758

regarded by both employers and the wider community. The OU has educated more than 1.6 million students since its first intake in 1971, and currently has more than 260,000 registered students and 1,200 full-time faculty.[2] Its department of politics and international relations has 31 faculty.[3] The OU has been a huge success in realizing its original mission of opening access to higher education. Starting by broadcasting course materials late at night via the BBC, the OU now works with the web, YouTube, and iTunes to offer the remote delivery of top-quality educational materials as cheaply and conveniently as possible.[4] Despite more than 40 years of offering the type of "competition" now dreaded by traditional US universities, the OU has *not* disrupted the traditional British university system in the process. On the margin, no doubt, some students did not go to traditional universities but took an OU degree instead, but the main effect of the OU has been to offer the possibility of a top-quality higher education to disadvantaged groups and other people who, for one reason or another, would otherwise have found this dispiritingly out of reach. I am not aware that the data on these outcomes exist, but my strong sense is that far more people have been fed into the traditional university system via the OU than have been leached away from it. One thing is certain: despite the success of OU, and by many accounts it is very good at what it does, only traditional universities offer students the special benefits of a university campus.

To see this from another perspective, think of yourself as a big employer needing to hire a steady stream of talented and versatile young people. Who do you prefer—whiz-kids with stellar scores from the very best online courses and training mills, or graduates with good, even if not stellar, grades from top universities? I think you know the answer.

The fact that our universities offer something really special means that the sky won't be falling in on us tomorrow but doesn't mean we should do nothing. It buys us time to get our act together. What follows is going to be easy to say but hard to do because universities are essentially communities of academics, and it takes a certain sort of person to be an academic. Many of us gravitate to academic life because we have high opinions of ourselves and firm ideas about what we want to do. We don't take kindly to being ordered around by others. We think of ourselves as smart but fiercely independent thinkers who don't take discipline easily. That's why we like the tenure system. This means that academic policy makers don't just have to address the challenges faced by the university system—in many ways that's the easy part—they also have to build a consensus among their colleagues, especially their tenured colleagues, that they all need to change many of their cozy and convenient ways of doing things.

So what needs to be done? Let's start with teaching and move on to research. I may be Pollyanna but I'm not in the least bit worried about a future full of massive open online courses and a shift to web-based *training* more generally. I stress training here because we will increasingly need to distinguish between *training* and *education*. We have traditionally engaged in both, but it is education, not training, that is part of our core intellectual mission. If people can be trained more effectively to speak French, do calculus, or solve games for equilibrium using massively online platforms that capitalize on state-of-the-art pedagogic research, stellar teachers, and prodigious investment, then so much the better. We should welcome this with open arms and move on, not smashing the new machines but taking advantage of the huge resources they free up to do things much better and realize major improvements in our core business of education.

All of this implies that we should think about four basic types of courses. First, any course that can sensibly be evaluated using a multiple choice test, or graded by a machine, should be treated as training and should be bought in and taught online, leveraging all of that state-of-the-art pedagogic research, stellar teaching, and prodigious investment. It makes no sense to put in lots of little efforts all over the profession, however worthy these might be, to hand-craft course offerings that are manifestly better for students if they are mass produced to the highest possible standards. Maybe these courses will have local teaching-assistant support and maybe they won't . . . whichever works best on a case-by-case basis is what we should do. This will be liberating. It by no means implies we won't *educate* students in French or calculus or the techniques of formal theory. It means that *basic training* in these subjects will be the very best the profession can offer wherever, whenever, and to whomever this might be delivered.

Building on this solid foundation, we the specialists then will devise a second type of course, in which we will each bring our own unique perspective to bear on *educating* students about why, when, where, and how to use the skills for which they have just been trained. This will be close-in, hands-on teaching, which can only be done in person on a university campus. In these courses, for example, we won't be *training* our students in statistical techniques—we'll have bought in the world's best pedagogy to achieve that objective. We'll be *educating* students in how to *use* the statistical techniques they have learned. We will have banished the pedagogical drudgery of training and opened up the educational Pandora's Box of how to design and conduct well-designed, valid, and convincing analyses of important datasets.

The third type, of course, will be a challenge for political science, because we have not come to a consensus about what is at the core of the discipline. But imagine we had come to such a consensus—and perhaps we have, for example, about the classics of political philosophy or the political institutions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096512001758 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the European Union. Here, we are thinking about courses for which we could all agree on using one of a small number of core textbooks, each adapted to different teaching styles and audiences. It makes sense to work exhaustively on these textbooks to make them better and better over time, rather than forever writing new ones—with only paradigm shifts in the profession generating a need for a new set of texts. Just as it makes sense for authors from a range of different institutions to collaborate on a great course text, it makes sense for professors to collaborate on ways to deliver the associated course to the highest possible standard—taking full advantage of modern pedagogy and new technology wherever appropriate. For example, I teach "Introduction to Comparative Politics" at New York University and would love to put together an "all-stars" version of this with a consortium of four or five top-notch colleagues from around the world—some of whom are departmental colleagues. Who knows precisely how this might evolve, but I can easily imagine each colleague taking responsibility for course materials and lectures on parts of the course in which they excel, with 40-minute lectures teleconferenced live across all sites, followed by a teleconferenced question-and-answer session for students in all sites featuring a brains trust of the full consortium of professors. Small group local backup with teaching assistants could proceed exactly as before. The essence of the course would not be so different from how it is now. We would just use existing technology to making it much better by having it developed, refined, and delivered by an all-star multi-continental team of professors. The big breakthrough will be nothing to do with technology, which is already in place, but having both professors and universities think about leveraging this technology by developing collaboration. At the end of the day, this technology will not have made us redundant; quite the reverse, it will have helped us all to do a better job, which is the purpose of new technology.

The big breakthrough will be nothing to do with technology, which is already in place, but having both professors and universities think about leveraging this technology by developing collaboration. At the end of the day, this technology will not have made us redundant; quite the reverse, it will have helped us all to do a better job, which is the purpose of new technology.

The fourth type of course—seminar courses on specialized topics involving a close-in interaction between a professor and a small group of students, typically on a topic close to the professor's research interests—may not change very much. In many ways this type of course is the essence of a university education. New technologies will obviously enhance such courses in idiosyncratic ways but will not essentially change them. There nothing fundamentally new to worry about here, just the age-old concern about how to do what we do best even better, using whatever new tools are available.

The bottom line is that new technology will surely disrupt our traditional model of university teaching, and our job is to ride the tiger not get eaten by it. If we treat these disruptions as opportunities not threats, the net result will be that we outsource routine training and double down on what we do best, which is delivering a high-quality education that depends fundamentally on a human interaction between teacher and student. What we need to do *right now* is to take a hard look at our curricula in political science (or any other subject) and figure out how much of what we currently have is training that could be more effectively outsourced if we could only get over our atavistic fear of outsourcing and how much is the close-in education that can only be delivered effectively on a university campus. Nobody I know has done this survey yet, but this is what needs to be done.

Thinking about challenges and disruptions to the place of research in the future of universities is easier. This is not because it is an easy problem but because the fundamental issues are not really new, even if the funding environment in which these play out is turning more hostile. I referred earlier to the critical role of universities as cradles for intellectual development, and we have a sacred duty to protect this with the utmost ferocity, more or less whatever the cost. To make another crude distinction that may help clarify the debate, we can think of two sources of funding for basic research, "patrons" and "investors." The patronage of arts and sciences by the Medicis, or self-patronage by rich aristocrats like the Marquis de Condorcet, resulted in extraordinary achievements, yet were not motivated by any explicit desire for a quantifiable return on investment. Contrast this with materials scientists in an Intel research lab paid to find ways to build better, faster, smaller, and cooler processor chips. The materials scientists may well engage in blue-skies research, with a very slim probability of unearthing something really big and valuable. Hugely risky research investments may be made, but these are still *investments* in the sense that some cost-benefit calculus is involved, with some bottom line for the investor. It is not my sense that Intel is investing in research on how to save pandas from extinction.

The wonderful thing about the tenure system in universities in particular, and the traditional university research ethos more generally, is that research is not seen as an *investment* with a bottom line, however far out on the horizon, but as a good in itself that contributes to human welfare in the round. Over the past hundred years or so, universities have become the core *patrons* of research, and *this* is the role we have to fight for. When times are tough there is a strong and in many ways understandable tendency for those who fund universities to start thinking about research in terms of investment . . . to think in terms of bottom lines and of the "usefulness" of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096512001758 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular research projects. After all, when we need to cut back, why would we not first cut back on the least useful activities? This seems like plain old-fashioned common sense. Seeking value for money, funders start to think about measuring "value." Although it is not a new challenge, there is a considerable challenge in crafting the right response to all of this.

Clearly, we can't tell funders to go jump in a lake and stop whining about value for money. (A) The funders have all the money. (B) This is a patently unreasonable response. Clearly, we can't be forced into the position of dreaming up some dollar value, however speculative, for every piece of university research. This will undermine the very ethos of basic research. But surely we do have to find a way to convince the outside world that we can reliably separate the "good" from the "bad" in university research, *and* that our notions of good and bad are not self-serving. I look with envy compounded by bottomless ignorance at the "hard" sciences and think this job must be easier for them. It doesn't seem like it should be too hard to convince at least reasonable outsiders that scientific research leads to consistent small gains and occasional massive breakthroughs that manifestly improve the human condition. Most people in the developed world make daily use of useful innovations that started life in a research lab so the argument about the value of this type of research is easy to intuit. The social sciences face a much more difficult task, because almost everyone thinks they can do social science as well as if not better than a social scientist. I don't how to do it, but we have to solve this problem.

Professional associations have done sterling—but in my view misguided—work on occasion by putting together and publicizing portfolios of "useful" social science research. This is misguided because it takes us down the "value for money" road. What we need, although I'm not sure how we achieve this, is a beauty parade of really smart social scientists who are doing really great work that connects in important ways with the interests of people who live outside the groves[5] of academe. Take networks. There is interesting but difficult rigorous work to be done—both theoretical and empirical—on social networks, and this is intrinsically interesting to people outside the academy because it plays into and deepens intuitions they have about their own lives. Popular books on networks have sold well, and the press has not been slow to report results from network research. This is just an example. and I am not suggesting that we should only do research that might eventually find its way into a popular book that sells well (although that is a point of view). However, we all have to work on our "elevator" pitches. We must be able to explain to outsiders—very quickly and very clearly—why what we do is interesting and important. That *may* include mention of potentially huge economic benefits, which are interesting and important in themselves. But the advantage we often fail to capitalize on, as social scientists, is that most people are intrinsically interested both in themselves and in how they interact with others—and we have a wealth of fascinating things to say about this.

So, while we definitely should not go out and about selling what we do as a valuable investment for society, we definitely should go out and about spreading the word about all those insights and intuitions we have about how human beings interact with each other. We should not feel under a burden to demonstrate value for money, because putting a monetary value on what we do is a losing proposition. But we should indeed feel under a burden to demonstrate, in the clearest possible terms, that what we do is important and interesting for large group of people outside the academy. If we can't do that, then we probably don't deserve their support.

Putting this all together, we can pull through this time of transition stronger than ever. We need to develop red-hot elevator pitches for our research and assemble the full portfolio of these into a rationale for why we need research campuses driven by an intrinsic thirst for knowledge rather than an instrumental return on investment. We need to refine the argument about why we need to educate the young adults of the next generation on these research campuses. And we need to welcome with open arms the coming technological disruption of how we best deliver that education. This approach will involve a crystal-clear separation of essential *training* that can be outsourced, automated, and delivered in a mass context from education that is an essentially personal interaction between teacher and student—best taking place in person on a university campus.

We will probably fail and get ourselves in trouble because we are stuck in our comfortable ways and will respond too slowly and too timidly to move effectively with the times. But we need not fail if we move forward with a *very* clear vision of the simply irreplaceable and invaluable things that happen on a university campus and an implacable determination to defend these. ■

NOTES

1. http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/main/
2. http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained/facts-and-figures
3. http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/about-the-faculty/departments/politics/our-staff.php
4. http://www.open.edu/openlearn/
5. In an earlier draft, a spellchecker corrected a typo to replace "groves" with "gravies." I was tempted to leave this in, since unexpected wisdom can reside in a spellchecker, but thought better of it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096512001758 Published online by Cambridge University Press