

Reimagining the university

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In his commentary, Making NUS and NTU great Singapore universities, Mr Han Fook Kwang enjoined both the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University to produce research that, beyond the ever-important academic accolades, “will make a difference to the country and its people”.

However, before we even get to figuring out how to reconcile the potentially conflicting tasks of a university – academic research, teaching, and the broader national development agenda, among others – there is the even more fundamental question of “What is a university?”

Is our current notion of the university still fit for purpose and appropriate for these disruptive, fluid and fast-moving times?

The office I head, the NUS Futures Office, was set up to ask such basic, even naive, questions, chief among which being the very idea of the university. How did the idea of the modern, comprehensive research

university evolve? How might it yet evolve? Questioning afresh the idea, the rationale, and the value of the university causes great impatience, to say nothing of consternation, because these are questions we assumed we settled long ago.

But perhaps these answers, and their underlying assumptions, no longer hold in a world of complex and accelerating changes.

For us in pragmatic Singapore, it behoves us to challenge some key assumptions we hold of higher education. For example, we assume that in the higher education space inhabited by different entities, the “university” is the dominant actor among polytechnics, institutes of technical education, and so forth. What if that is no longer the case? What if alternatives such as the guilds and apprenticeships challenge, if not supplant, the primacy of the university, at least in its teaching aspect?

Furthermore, especially in Singapore, we still assume that young people, if they have the ability and the resources, will always aspire to a place in the university; that the road to success still mainly cuts through the university. What if they don’t, and what if it’s not? How then should

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we reimagine the university? Indeed, if the university did not exist today, would it be necessary to invent it? And if yes, what form should it take?

The modern university familiar to us did not emerge fully formed. Emeritus Professor of Higher Education Ronald Barnett, at the Institute of Education, University of London, points to its earliest incarnation: the metaphysical university. He locates the metaphysical university some 2,000 years ago in the Greek, Persian, Indian and Chinese traditions of the “academy”, an “institution through which individuals could come to stand in a new and surer relationship with the world”. The focus of the metaphysical university was to “open up new forms of human being”.

The metaphysical university evolved into the pragmatic one. Today’s modern university, by and large, is a place that measures, describes, defines and analyses. It extols rules and performance metrics. It is governed by the assumption, a heroic and optimistic one, that the world is completely amenable to our understanding and control, given enough time and effort. In such a world view, there is no mystery left in the world.

Of course it is all well and good to unlock the mysteries of the cosmos. I fear, though, that the solving of mysteries, and the accompanying

hubris, has also led to the loss of the sense of mystery, or what philosopher Hannah Arendt referred to as *thaumazein*, the ceaseless sense of awe at not knowing. With the loss of a sense of mystery, the university risks becoming a mundane place. A place in which objectives have to be explicitly articulated, learning outcomes stated up front, and most bizarrely, the impact of research has to be spelt out before the research even begins.

I believe that the future of the university consists in large part in going back to its metaphysical roots, as defined by Professor Barnett. This is no romantic lamentation over the impoverishment of the modern university. The metaphysical university’s emphasis on the formation of the whole human being, of equipping its students with different sets of moral and political vocabulary to make sense of themselves and their place in the universe, or at least society, and its emphases on reasoning, rhetoric, and ethics – all of these things essentially translate into the so-called “soft skills” we are convinced are essential for a world of digital disruptions, of political contestation, of fake news (and fake news legislation).

These traits and meta-level skills – learning for learning’s sake, imagination, authenticity, critical thinking, and resilience – that we

now encourage in our schools were standard fare served up by the metaphysical university.

Inasmuch as the university should prepare its students for the working world, it should also equip them with the skills to navigate the human condition, to debate contentious issues, such as gay rights and Singapore’s 377A legislation, to evaluate evidence, to challenge conventional wisdom, and to detect falsehoods and fallacies.

Finally, the attributes of the metaphysical university resonate with the contemporary push towards lifelong learning (notice that it is not referred to as lifelong education). The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that education in a world of unstable meanings and disorienting changes can only take the form of lifelong learning, in which the key element is the continuous forming (and re-forming) of the self in response to an ever-changing world.

We urgently need to reconnect the pragmatic university with ideas of mystery, of imagination, and even emancipation. We expect the university to be the wellspring of imagination and yet ironically, the first failure of imagination may well be the failure to reimagine the university.

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