

## Introduction

In 2002 Rob Fisher and David Preston inaugurated a series of Global Conferences on the *Idea of Education*. They felt that current pressures on Higher Education threatened the very idea of education that lies at the heart of Higher Education in general and of university education in particular.

The conferences were designed to be a locus of intense debate on and investigation of the idea of liberal education and its fate in the transforming landscape of Higher Education. Committed to this tradition of liberal education, the inherent value of the pursuit of learning and the principle that knowledge must be an end in itself, the conference series broadly examined the nature and aims of university education, its guiding principles, its practical functions, and its role in society.

The first two the Global Conferences were held in Oxford, at Mansfield College - the first from Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> of July to Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2002, the second from Friday 4<sup>th</sup> July to Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2003. The third Global Conference was organised in Prague at CERGE-EI and ran from Monday 9<sup>th</sup> of August to Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> August 2004.

Papers, reports, presentations, and workshops were invited on the following themes:

- What a university should be; where the idea of what a university is should come from; what higher education 'is'; what the aims of higher education should be; what language best expresses the idea of education.
- The nature of education; the role of liberal arts education; 'instruction', 'training' and 'vocational training'; the changing roles of and between universities, colleges, and polytechnics; the 'usefulness' of education; the 'value' of education; learning and distance learning; learning and open learning.
- The changing landscapes of education; 'students,' 'pupils,' 'learners' and 'customers;' 'lecturer,' 'teacher,' 'tutor,' 'mentor;' the rise and impact of student services; course review and evaluation; modularisation; the costs of education.
- The 'business' of the university - academic freedom and the rise of managerialism; wealth creation; intellectual capital; intellectual copyright; knowledge and research; knowledge and teaching; the preservation of knowledge in libraries, museums, galleries; the diffusion of knowledge through publishing, multimedia, and the Internet.
- External issues impacting on education: funding education; private sector involvement; government involvement; Academic Audit; Research Assessment Exercise; QAA; Teaching Quality Assessment.
- Internal issues impacting on education: key skills, transferable skills; access to education - ties with schools; life-long education; adult education; returning to learning; education as a 'right'; fees, grants, and loans.
- The role of the university in society; the contexts of the university; the needs of society; reconceiving the place and work of the university.

This eBook brings together a selection of the presentations made at these conferences. The eBook is designed to be a snapshot of what actually happened at the conferences. The selected papers are for the most part reprinted as presented at the conferences. David Preston edited two volumes in which developed versions of selected presentations were published: *The Idea of Education* (2003) and *Contemporary Issues In Education* (2005). Both were published by Rodopi.

Jan Parker, writing about the UK, is concerned about the commodification of higher education and the limited aspirations of students. Even more depressing is the fact that many university teachers share the limited approach. This can lead to a downright collusion in a downward spiral of input by both parties on the grounds that *they* want to do the minimum in order to get the award, *we* want to push as many people as possible through the course. She advocates a model of higher education based on engaged disciplinary communities.

Jayne Beilke traces the evolution of American universities to the point where Boyer has concluded that "the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's most pressing problems" She analyses the role of service learning in re-connecting universities with communities and the obstacles that prevent a more rapid growth of service learning. In particular, the development of new delivery systems (on-line education) is destroying the traditional community of learners; this places an onus on academic staff to create and maintain a community as it exists within the institution and its surrounding neighbourhoods.

Tom Claes analyses how European Union economic ambitions have transformed universities into key players in the national innovation-systems. This in turn has led to massive changes in how universities are financed and how funds are allocated internally, involving more competitive funding and closer alignment or research with perceived societal needs. Ironically, success in gaining research funds may encourage universities

to move staff away from teaching towards concentration on research, abandoning the Humboldtian ideal of staff teaching and researching. While Claes cites a recent European expert group that saw merit in maintaining the traditional research-teaching nexus, he does not seem to be convinced that the trend towards a growing rift between teaching and research will be avoided.

Trends in the former communist country of the Czech Republic, researched by Anna Vitaskova, echo some of the ideas of Beilke and Claes. She concluded that transformation in the Czech Republic is now driven by the creation of a knowledge-based society. This in turn requires entrepreneurial universities that interact with non-academic knowledge producers, encourage practical knowledge and achieve timely diffusion of innovation. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world in Australia, the practice of using business management tools to ensure quality in universities is criticised by Trudi Cooper. These quality management tools assume a customer-supplier relationship in which quality is based on meeting customer expectations; this is quite inappropriate for a higher education setting.

In his second contribution to this collection Claes uses analytical ethics to analyse the debate on the nature of the university. He contrasts the Traditionalist and Innovative models of universities, thereby highlighting many of the changes that have taken place in universities in recent decades (in the role of professors, allocation of research funding, management of institution, etc.). He concludes that the university has become one of the centrepieces of our culture. For that reason, he is not surprised that laying claims on the term “university” is so important and that the word “university” is a prize well worth winning.

While many of the contributions have highlighted elements of the crisis facing universities, Marcel Dube strikes a more optimistic note in his description of a new inter-disciplinary degree in Law and Biotechnology in Canada. He sees this development as fulfilling the idea of Herbert Spencer that the great aim of education is not knowledge but action. Are we moving into a brave new world of inter-disciplinarity? To illustrate that this move to new modes of teaching and learning will not be all plain sailing, we have Anne Grant’s description of the difficulties that faced nursing educators in Ireland when they moved the study of nursing into a traditional university. The differences in culture and organisation structure in Nursing Schools and universities were great and the first moves towards integration caused stress for nurse educators. But Grant remains optimistic that nurse teachers will in time find their niche in higher education. Meanwhile, Carola Boehm describes the problems that have faced Music Technology as an inter-disciplinary study in UK universities (and she sees these problems as extending both well beyond British shores and beyond Music Technology). While there are problems in its integration in discipline-specific structures, she advocates a possible solution in “Vertical Centres for Teaching and Research”.

More evidence of the brave new world, this time in regard to teacher education, is offered by Daly, Pachler and Lambert in their description of the development of an innovative Masters degree in Teaching at London’s Institute of Education. Their work is also based on Boyer’s “scholarship of teaching” (see references to Beilke above) but their approach seeks to develop a shared knowledge construction at a distance through computer-mediated communication. They concluded that unless such novel ways to teacher development are conceived and unless higher education teacher education is prepared to re-conceptualise its role, purpose and nature, lifelong teacher learning is in danger of remaining mere rhetoric. Georgia Nikolaidou also advocates the use of ICT, this time to aid the teaching of music to Primary school children.

One of the effects of the Bologna Process on higher education is to encourage greater alignment of curricula in similar programmes in different European countries. Peric *et al* have developed a mathematical approach to measuring the differences between programmes, as an aid to determining whether programmes are suitable for student exchange programmes. While their model was developed in respect of Engineering programmes in Serbia, it may be applied more generally.

Long *et al* start their contribution by maintaining that UK students increasingly perceive themselves to be customers of a service (because of the funding arrangements and other factors) and that this has been the case in postgraduate education for some time. Students as customers require quality service to match their needs and so Long *et al* sought to develop a “service template”, particularly to serve postgraduate distance students. In a related paper, Tony Tricker, who is part of the “et al” in Long *et al*, provides an analysis of how student expectations have changed over the last three decades.

Elaine Fisher and Kevin Fisher have researched the views of teachers within Further Education in the UK, in the context of extensive changes in the environment in which they work. They have sought to discover the culture of the sector and the views of practitioners on what may be useful in producing a professional ethos. Money and recognition figured strongly in the responses. Their work is continuing as a longitudinal study.

Linking all of these contributions was a strong sense of agreement that major changes are occurring in the life of universities. Some saw the changes as threatening and requiring a concerted effort to resist them; others, perhaps bowing to the inevitable, described strategies that embraced the changes and sought to re-define the role of the university. It was clear from the contributions from many countries that the changes were not confined to a few countries, but rather were widespread within Europe and North America.

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The editors would like to thank all the participants who made these three conferences such a stimulating and engaging experience. The *Idea of Education* project is currently being refocused and a number of other Higher Education projects previously organised as a part of the *At the Interface* conference series are combined into a single project - still to be entitled *The Idea of Education*.

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