
The University, Society and Democracy

‘Are the great universities of the world, rather like the stones of the monastic sites visited today, to become like them in time, merely tourist attractions of the future’

President Michael. D. Higgins (Irish Times 8th June 2021)

Introduction

The definition of a university means a community of teachers, researchers, and students. As an institution, the university is as old as civilisation itself. The university defines, interprets and celebrates knowledge, which gives our world innovation, meaning and coherence. It questions other institutions and belief systems. That constitutes the critical role of the university in society. Knowledge enables citizens to think and to know. ‘Knowledge is power,’ as Michael Foucault famously observed. Unfortunately, the gift of knowledge is not equally available to all citizens. Widening participation and opening access constitute a democratic challenge for the 21st century, as President Higgins’ wise observation suggests. Without a strong commitment to open access universities may make themselves irrelevant to the changing needs of the population. As one of the oldest institutions in Western civilization the university is a key cornerstone of civil society and civility in a globalised world. Its role in anchoring our culture is part of the historic mission of the university to enlighten our thinking- turning us into citizens of the world.

A brief history of the university and lessons for the present

I would like to argue in this paper that the university has an ancient provenance that dates from classical Greece and extends through Celtic Ireland, Medieval Europe to the modern globalised university – that is ranked in global league tables – QS, Times Higher Ed (THE), Shanghai Jiao Tong etc. These contemporary global league tables enforce a monocultural stereotypical vision of the ‘successful’ university. It is a corporate rather than a civic vision of the university that is driven by the marketization of higher education in an increasingly service-led economy. The research role of the university is driven by the marketized imperatives of the knowledge economy. The answer in terms of the future role of the university in the corporate mind is simple. It needs to be commodified and financialized. Arguably, a more civic and community-engaged university would counter-balance the globalising forces that are reframing education and scholarship in the image of market values and economic imperatives. In this paper, I will make the case for a civic university that is primarily located in the cultural and social life of its citizens. While no reasonable person would decry the role of the university in commercial and economic activities or the need to reach out to industrial partners- universities primarily have a cultural mission. That should be sacrosanct in a society that values democracy over oligarchy. Historically the university has had a deeper and more complex role and function in shaping our world for the better. The university’s role should not be subordinated to serving the utilitarian needs of the economy. Its cultural and social functions are much more important.

Aristophanes’ play ‘clouds’ (first produced in 433BC) is a comedy of ideas that lampoons the great philosopher Socrates’ Athenian Academy. In the play, Aristophanes represents Socrates’ Academy as a ‘Thinkery’ or ‘Talking Shop’ that offers intellectual ideas that are immoral, pointless and even dangerous. The ancient Greeks called it Sophistry after the philosophical school known as Asthesophists. Aristophanes wrongly call Socrates a

Sophist. The play 'clouds' presents a picture of Socrates, the embodiment of the public intellectual as 'having his head in the clouds'. The point being made is that academics exist in a parallel universe – divorced from reality. Aristophanes suggests that Socrates was responsible for the radical democratic ideas sweeping Athens at the time. He turns the academic as personified by Socrates into a subversive. Aristophanes was a social conservative who distrusted democracy as mob rule.

Aristophanes' play 'clouds' cited twenty-five years later at Socrates trial, at which he was famously accused of corrupting the minds of the young. This nebulous charge cost Socrates his life. It turned him into a martyr for academic freedom. He is still viewed as its champion.

Behind Aristophanes misrepresentation of Socrates' Athenian academy is a view that humanist education and logical reasoning pose a danger to political stability and the moral order. Aristophanes presents Socrates' teaching approach, known as Socratic dialogue, as 'Unjust Logic' (reason) as opposed to the 'Just Logic' (belief) of the traditional social order.

The recent cultural war on woke (ie public awareness of social inequality and discrimination) reminds us that this fundamental debate about the politics of knowledge (reason versus belief) is still very much alive 2,200 years later. It also reminds us of the fragility of the university, as a cornerstone of our civilisation in an age when liberal elites are under attack from nativist populists.

The decline and fall of the ancient world (symbolised by the fall of Rome in 410 CE to the Barbarians) is often equated with the end of civilisation – the Dark Ages that lasted a thousand years. Sir Kenneth Clarke in his monumental book and TV series 'Civilisation' argues that European Civilisation survived by 'the skin of our teeth' during these barbarous Dark Ages. The defining event, according to Clarke, was the arrival of a boatload of 50 scholars at Cork in 550AD. We celebrate this historic cultural event at UCC in our motto 'Where Finbarr Taught: Let Munster Learn'. The scholars were monks. They are personified by Finbarr, who established a monastic centre of learning here in Cork. UCC's roots date from this cultural event.

In pitifully humble and incompetently constructed buildings, monastic settlements emerged as the basis of the modern town and university. Cork emerges from Sir Kenneth Clarke's narrative as the thread between the classical academy in Ancient Greece and the contemporary university. Cork has been a European City of Culture and is currently UNESCO City of Learning. It is important that we highlight the city's role in the survival of European culture and learning when it had been extinguished elsewhere in Europe.

Monastic settlements embody the most conservative traditions of learning in which monks and nuns entered the cloistered life of contemplation. In monastic scriptoria scholars laboriously reproduced books by hand, embellished with the most intricate artistic designs that celebrated and glorified knowledge, while recording the narrative of civilisation. The Book of Kells, located in Trinity College Dublin, epitomises this celebration of knowledge, as the key to Western civilisation and culture.

Monasteries were also centres of scientific learning and discovery with herbariums, hospices and hospitals. As Umberto Eco in his celebrated best-selling book – [The Name of the Rose](#) – demonstrates, monks built libraries that housed book collections from classical civilisation (Greece and Rome), including philosophical works, often in Arabic translations. The books were retranslated back into Latin. The university adopted Latin as its language

which is still symbolically used in graduation ceremonies.

While monasteries often grew into towns, it was in the great Medieval and Renaissance European cities – notably Paris – that a new body of scholars, industrious, argumentative and curious emerged. The invention of the printing press, symbolised by Gutenberg's press in 1439, liberated knowledge by creating a mass literate public, whose consciousness and curiosity, was transformed by reading. Out of the popularisation of books and pamphlets emerged a political public demanding democracy in the name of reason and justice – premised on the democratic values of liberty, equality and solidarity. The wheel of civilisation had been turned by knowledge. Sadly, large sections of society have been culturally excluded from this monumental change. While childhood and schooling became mass activities, most citizens were excluded from the privileged world of the university on the basis of their class, gender and ethnicity. While barriers were slowly removed during the twentieth century in terms of gender discrimination, major barriers to working-class class and ethnic minority participation continue to define educational access. Angered by their cultural exclusion and economic deskilling in the age of globalisation and automation, a 'left-behind' generation have been reacting to the privileged status of cosmopolitan liberal-minded elites in the form of reactionary political events such as Brexit or the election of Donal Trump as President of the United States.

Demonstrating Knowledge

Alfred O'Rahilly in 1916 as a young academic at UCC launched a series of adult education classes on social and political topics, including; Poverty and Strikes. The great working-class intellectual and autodidact, James Connolly, had to develop his literary and scholarly gifts without the benefit of a formal education, complained in the Workers Republic in 1916 about the suppression of these adult education classes – admonishing 'The Merchant Princes' – who in Connolly's view feared the power of knowledge to change the world for the better.

The life of Alfred O'Rahilly (1884-1969) has been chronicled by Professor John A. Murphy, with his customary brilliance and wit. He describes O'Rahilly as 'a volatile and bristling polymath' whose intellectual interests encompassed mathematics, philosophy, sociology and theology.

Between 1920 and 1954 Alfred O'Rahilly served successively as Registrar and President of UCC. He also served briefly as a T.D. in Dáil Éireann during this period and was the Irish representative on the International Labour Organisation (ILO). O'Rahilly was close to the labour and trade union movement.

Alfred O'Rahilly was a flamboyant controversialist in the conservative tradition of the Catholic Social Movement which was enormously influential during the early twentieth century. Critics unfairly derided O'Rahilly, suggesting he took a very traditional view of the world. Through his editorial role in the Catholic Standard, O'Rahilly communicated his controversial ideas to a wide audience. He was also a leading member of the Commission on Vocationalism (1943). He strongly supported a corporate state.

But it would be wrong to infer that O'Rahilly's ideological orientation, which was shaped by his fervent Catholicism, defines him as a social reactionary. He was a much more complex figure who espoused many radical educational initiatives. He was a notably reforming President of UCC, who introduced Adult Education and Social Science to the campus. His diploma in Social Studies brought learning, social dialogue and community engagement to the Munster Region. O'Rahilly was quintessentially a civic minded President of UCC that sought to open -up the university to the community. In this regard, he was a social progressive, well ahead of his time.

When I became the first professor of Applied Social Studies at UCC in 1990, I found O’Rahilly to be an inspirational figure. His spirit has remained very much alive in UCC. He is a justly revered figure. O’Rahilly’s enormous energy and intellectual self-confidence allowed him to dream about a world where everybody had access to third level education. At the time there was an element of magical realism in his big ideas. As Professor John A. Murphy points out, O’Rahilly loved big ideas. O’Rahilly wanted to create a civic university for the citizens. His enthusiasm knew no bounds. In this sense, he was an educationist far ahead of his time. O’Rahilly’s bold vision set a standard for the Irish university system that provides a counterpoint to the commodification of knowledge in a global modernizing era. O’Rahilly was a complex larger than life figure-polymath, controversialist, politician and educationist. His spirit reminds us of what is possible while rejecting his more socially and politically conservative ideas. This is Alfred O’Rahilly’s cultural legacy to the world.

Widening Participation in Higher Education

O’Rahilly was undoubtedly a dreamer, who tried to make his dreams come true. How can we build upon his legacy? How can O’Rahilly inspire us? O’Rahilly was quintessentially a nation -builder, who believed in the socially transformative power of education. Nation- builders like Professor Alfred O’Rahilly and UCD Professor Patrick Lynch (Chair of the OECD Report ‘Investment in Education’, 1966), understood that Ireland’s road to sustainability as an independent state depended on mass third level education. But this is where the complexity begins.

The HEA (2015) National Plan for Equality of Access to Higher Education observed:

Ireland is among the leading countries [in Europe] in providing alternative entry routes and enrolments by students whose parents did not participate in higher education. By contrast we have relative low levels of participation in higher education by students from groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage

(Higher Education Authority, 2015)

The above comment made by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in its **National Plan for Equality of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019** captures the essential paradox in Irish higher education – dynamic expansion without achieving quality of access. Participation rates in Irish higher education rose from 20% of the relevant cohort (18-22 year olds) in 1980 to 44% in 1988 and to 52% in 2011 (HEA, 2015:13). During this period the secondary school completion also grew from 60% in the early 1980s to 81% in 2002 and to almost 91% in 2013 (HEA, 2015:13). However, the HEA (2015:14) also noted that within this prodigious higher education expansion some social groups and communities were left behind and marginalised:

- **Participation of those from semi-skilled or unskilled socio-economic groups is at 26% compared with 100% for the higher profession, farming and the self-employed;**
- **Community plays a significant role with 99% of 18-20 year olds in one of Dublin’s affluent postcode districts going on to higher education compared with 15% in the two postal districts which have high levels of deprivation;**
- **Disabled students, mature entrants and those from ethnic minorities (e.g. Travellers) were less likely to enter higher education.**

At the bottom of the chain were students from 825 EDIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity Schools), which are

targeted at disadvantaged areas and communities. The HEA (2015:37) commented that only 24% of students in DEIS schools completing the school year of the senior cycle (year 6) progress to higher education, compared with 50% from all schools. DEIS schools account for a mere 12% of entrants to higher education, of which 8% come from rural areas and 4% from urban areas (HEA: 2015:37).

Benefits of Education

Access to higher education brings significant economic benefits to individuals and society. During the economic crisis (2008-2013) the chances of a graduate becoming unemployed was half that of a non-graduate. After the crisis graduates were employed more quickly than non-graduates. The HEA (2015:14) also observed a graduate earnings premium. Males with degrees earn 69% more than non-graduate males. For women, the equivalent figure is 90%. Clearly, there are major economic benefits from higher education, which promotes social mobility. As the HEA (2015:14) puts it:

As well as the benefits that individuals derive from higher education, there are also other economic and social benefits – our educated workforce is Ireland's greatest economic asset and we need more people to take up education to drive economic progress.

The HEA (2015:14) in its National Access Plan further notes that the benefits from higher education are also personal, social and cultural:

There are also many non-financial benefits to having a higher education – as graduates tend to enjoy greater job satisfaction, participate to a greater extent in society, and have better health; and they are also likely to pass down an appreciation for education and its benefits to the next generation and to their local communities.

At a personal level, participation in higher education enhances an individual's cultural capital. The influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that individuals are empowered in life by the possession of cultural capital in various forms. Academic achievement is defined by possession of a degree which in turn impacts on cultural capital (i.e. social assets, tastes, manners, speech, communication skills and intellectual understanding of the world in which we live). Bourdieu acknowledges that the acquisition of cultural capital is fundamentally linked to the possession of economic capital and social class. He observes that cultural capital manages to combine the advantages of economic capital with the prestige of the symbolic capital arising from the individual's achievement, in a manner that disguises its class origins. The result is that educational inequality is submerged with a meritocratic ideal, called the points system in Ireland.

The Access Challenge

A recent study of widening participation in Ireland jointly funded by the Irish Research Council and the Department of Education and Skills. This research is being carried out by the School of Applied Social Studies and UCC Plus+ programme and involves DEIS schools in Dublin, Cork and Kerry. It has revealed an intergenerational change in disadvantaged young people's attitudes towards going to college. There is now a very widespread commitment amongst young people to participate in higher education by all socio-economic groups. Two-thirds of DEIS school students aspire to go to college. Less than 15% succeed in realising their aspirations. There are major barriers including:

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- **Poverty and social deprivation;**
 - **Competitive advantage of middle-class students to access private education;**
 - **A lack of cultural capital amongst lower socio-economic groups;**
 - **Ethnicity – notably membership of the traveller community;**
 - **Social anxiety, fear of displacement and cultural disrespect.**

(see: M.Scanlon, F.Powell, P.Leahy, H.Jenkinson and O.Byrne 'No one in our Family Ever Went to College' **International Journal of Educational Research** 93 2019)

What can be done about educational disadvantage?

- **End child poverty, which is the main cause of educational disadvantage;**
- **Set up a national learning bank that funds 4 years of free education and for every citizen as of right;**
- **Place investment in education at the centre of public policy;**
- **Widen pathways to access and lifelong learning;**
- **Extend support for adult education and seek to harness its socially transformative potential;**
- **Promote access schemes such as HEAR and DARE through additional funding;**
- **Provide a charter of rights for disabled students enshrined in equality law including - reasonable adjustments and examination accommodations, as set out in equality principles;**
- **Support of the ideal of the civic university through the implementation of the 2014 IUA Charter of Community Engagement.**

Ovid's Advice

I would like to end this paper by returning to the classical world in the form of the Roman poet Ovid, who died in 17AD, exactly 2,000 years ago. His poetry challenged the moralistic dictatorship of Augustus Caesar – the self-proclaimed emperor – who sent Ovid into permanent exile. Ovid famously observed;

Note too that a faithful study of the liberal arts humanises character and permits it not to be cruel

Ovid influenced many great writers and cultural figures, including William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett. His period in exile enabled Ovid to reflect on the eternal themes of powerlessness and displacement. Beckett shared these concerns. Life is a voyage. Is it as absurd as Beckett suggests? Or can life have purpose and meaning? Education enables us to understand human experience and purpose. Higher education personalises knowledge - the right to know. It allows us to transcend our existential lives and see and understand the world in all its complexity. That is the gift of knowledge, which we celebrate at graduations, according to customs and rituals of the university that are at the very core of our civilisation and as old as its history.

This paper is based on the Inaugural Alfred O'Rahilly Lecture delivered by Professor Fred Powell on the 17th November 2017, which was hosted by the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education at UCC.



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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
