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What are Universities for?



What are Universities for?

Stefan Collini (2012) Penguin; London, 216 pages, £9.99UK/\$32 CAN, Paperback

Ian McDonald

BOOK REVIEW

Professor Stefan Collini (University of Cambridge) has the potentially intimidating title of “Professor of Intellectual History and English Literature;” however, his book, *What are Universities for?* is eminently readable, while still being truly “academic.” The author writes from the perspective of living and working in the United Kingdom, but many of the issues he raises and discusses are ones which resonate with a global audience. The author elaborated on the overall expansion of higher education, the increase in the range of courses available and the true meaning of a university education. In addition, the question which the author poses in his title is one which is highly applicable to the entire higher education arena, and more universities than ever are finding that they increasingly have to justify their existence.

This book will be of interest to all working in higher education, including lecturers, researchers, administrators, and managers. The book is divided into two parts. The first part provides background information about the reasons why universities exist. The second part has a slightly different format, and consists of a series of stand-alone essays and lectures delivered by the author over a number of years. In most of these essays, the author contests certain policies and trends in modern higher education.

In the introduction, Collini acknowledges the potential danger of asking what something is “for.” On one level, it can reduce complex questions and issues to just simplistic answers, but on another (and far more positive) level it can lead to a more in-depth discussion and a diverse range of views. In his discussion of the book’s title, the author successfully takes the latter approach.

Collini is very much of the opinion that the reason for the existence of universities is not solely for making money but for demonstrating their “economic value” to society. He is not afraid to look back into history when addressing the question posed in the book’s title, and he acknowledges that universities have changed greatly from the ecclesiastical beginnings of the oldest universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge. He cites the establishment in 1810 of the University of Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt (then Prussian Minister for Education) as the key moment when universities moved from merely being institutions for training future leaders for the church and civic government, to being centers for higher learning and, importantly, research work too. He also spends a whole fascinating chapter revisiting John Henry Newman’s important, but in Collini’s view imperfect, defense of a liberal education. “The Idea of a University” shows that many of the debates which currently rage in higher

education, for example, debates on which courses or types of courses are “useful” or “useless” existed long before the current “massification” of higher education.

The author notes interestingly that some subjects which originally became higher education courses for “practical” training purposes have, in fact, outlived their original purposes and have moved on to become academic disciplines in their own right. He gives the examples of anthropology, originally introduced to train future members of the colonial administrative services, and the classics, which have moved well beyond their original purpose of training wealthy young gentlemen for senior political or religious roles.

The fact that a chapter is dedicated to the humanities is not at all surprising; after all, the author is a professor of what would be classified as a humanities subject. Collini notes that the humanities, a term made popular in the mid-twentieth century in the United States of America, have been seen to almost permanently be “in crisis.” One significant reason Collini referenced humanities is because this discipline is not seen as pursuing new knowledge, unlike scientific and technological academic disciplines. Unlike more scientific and technological academic disciplines, everything in the humanities is challengeable and while some would see this as a negative, I would see this very much as a positive. Collini employs a useful tactic in trying to show similarities between the humanities and scientific subjects by emphasizing that both natural scientists and humanities’ academics strive for the same level of accuracy and precision. Overall, he does a good job at defending the humanities and showing that they are still vital to the fabric of a university.

A link with the social sciences is made and there is an acknowledgement of the overlap between the humanities and

social sciences. With this in mind perhaps it would have been helpful if a greater defense was made of the social sciences too, as they often face similar pressures and criticisms as the humanities’ subjects. However, because of the author’s own academic background, it is perhaps understandable that he chooses to focus his attention on one and not both.

Part two of the book, which I will spend less time on as it is more UK-centric, comprises a series of stand-alone lectures and essays given or written by the author over a number of years. Despite the fact that here Collini focuses more on higher education in the United Kingdom, the issues discussed will still be of great interest to all concerned about the future of higher education. Due to the subject matter of this part of the book, there is slightly less “flow” than in the first part, but the fact that the first of the pieces (assessing the quality of research) comes from 1988 and is as relevant now as it was then, speaks volumes about some of the on-going battles/discussions in higher education.

In the United Kingdom most universities (including my own) are currently preparing data and evidence for submission to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014, formerly the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), while debates still rage about the process and appropriateness of such quality measuring exercises. Similarly, in Australia, the next round of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) is scheduled for 2015. American readers of this review will be interested to read this chapter and also chapter nine where an excellent critique of the current obsession in the United Kingdom regarding the impact of research is given. Such exercises, in the view of Collini, reduce scholarly excellence to a simple quantitative number-crunching exercise.

The highlight of the book is undoubtedly the witty but pointed attack at the start of chapter seven on those who

demand that universities contribute to economic growth and become institutions which simply turn out future workers for companies. The author argues that there is nothing wrong with the intrinsic good of scholarship, and tackles often-made claims that there is a lack of productivity in higher education (again mainly with reference to the humanities), while also seeking to dismiss suggestions that academics are “loafers.” I agree wholeheartedly with Collini’s assertion that those involved in higher education are usually the very opposite of “loafers,” and instead are often obsessives who will spend many evenings and weekends re-reading and re-writing their work and, as a result, neglecting their friends and families! His “Diary of Don” in the latter part of this most amusing and acerbic of chapters cleverly shows the

struggles, frustrations and the sense of not being appreciated that many academics feel. He also demonstrates that far from being loafers, many are grossly overworked.

Some readers may wish that this book concluded with a more definitive manifesto of what the author believes the higher education sector across the world should resemble in the coming years. Collini chooses not to do this, but what he does in this excellent book is to put some of the discussions which are currently taking place in higher education, whether they are in the United Kingdom or worldwide, into their proper contexts. He is not afraid to argue that a university education still has an inherent worth, and he stoutly defends his own field of the humanities against its many critics.

About the Author

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