

Keynote address at the launch of the UCC Civic and Community Engagement Plan
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INTRODUCTION

Writing in the 17th century the philosopher-scientist, Francis Bacon, criticized two groups: one he described as cloistered philosophers, whom he compared to spiders weaving tenuous philosophical webs; the second he called 'uninformed practical technologies', which he said were like the mindless tasks of ants.

True scientists, he argued, 'should be like bees, which extract the goodness from nature and use it to make useful things'.

Bacon was writing in the period just before the Royal Society was formed and he was laying out a vision of a science which was driven by the urge for 'the effecting of all things possible' and the 'relief of man's estate'. This was also a vision of a world in which knowledge is not content just 'to sit and ponder'; nature is not simply to be observed and classified; but rather it is a world in which knowledge should be used to 'create marvelous devices and structures' with the goal of improving the world in which we all live.

This was not, in fact, what happened. Universities became cloistered places, where people tried to contemplate aspects of the world free from the exigencies or concerns of day-to-day life. There were moments in the history of universities where alternative possibilities did emerge – the land-grant universities in the United States, or the civic universities in the UK, both spoke to a tradition where some level of engagement with their local regions and communities formed part of their mission, even if this was not always pursued with alacrity.

But we have seen the renewal of this purpose with a growing global movement of universities which have rekindled this historic legacy and committed themselves, not just to reach beyond their institutional boundaries, but to do so with a commitment to partnership with the many publics that form the societies of which we are all a part.

There are now a number of networks pursuing these goals, and I note that you have worked closely with many of them in developing your plan.

I am involved with the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, which began as a network between US universities and the Council of Europe, and now includes representative Higher Education organizations from South Africa, Australia, and parts of Asia and Latin America. I am also pleased that the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement in the UK, and Campus Engage in Ireland are active members of the Consortium.

What we are all trying to do is recognize the civic potential, and civic responsibilities, of universities to address the key challenges facing our societies and our world. It is to take the view that when the entire university is engaged – human, academic, cultural and economic – enormous progress can be made at improving the communities in which they are located (Brophy and Godsil, 2009).

HONOUR TO BE HERE

I have to say it is a considerable honour, and a considerable pleasure, to join you here today as UCC renews its place, and enhances its ambition, in this growing global movement of engaged universities:

- I want to commend you on the civic engagement plan being launched today.
- I want to commend you on the commitment that is embedded in this plan.
- And I want to commend you, especially, for the spirit of engagement which animated the process through which this plan was developed

It is a particular pleasure to join you here today because Queen's Belfast and UCC have a special relationship, having spent the first 50 years or so as part of the same institution, the Queen's University of Ireland, later the Royal University of Ireland.

Some of you may know that when the idea of the Queen's University of Ireland was mooted in the 1840s, with Colleges in Cork, Galway and Belfast, there was some suggestion that Cork and Galway should be established formally as Catholic universities, while Belfast should be established as a Presbyterian university.

This idea did not find favour with the administrators in Dublin Castle. They were fresh from a defeat over their aspiration for a non-denominational national school system, and so they decided not to leave anything to chance and included, in the Charter of the new University, provisions to ensure its non-denominational character:

- we were not allowed to endow any denominational activity;
- we were not allowed to train ministers of religion or operate a Faculty of Theology;
- and we were not allowed to apply a religious test to any of our activities.

You will know better than I, what the College authorities here in Cork felt about these provisions. In Belfast the College authorities were unhappy, mainly because it meant they could not build a chapel or church on University premises and, in their view, a 'proper' university was one with a chapel for evensong, and the celebration of Easter and Christmas services.

Within 20 years of opening the College authorities in Belfast came up with a solution – they had to build a library, so they decided to build one that looked, to an outside viewer, as if it was a chapel. And the building is still there, now housing our Graduate School, with its gothic arches, stained-glass windows, cruciform shape, gargoyles peering off the roof, and 'pretend' flying buttresses acting as if they were holding the whole thing up.

Presumably the intent was that any casual passer-by would realize this was, in fact, the University because of the very fine-looking chapel that it contained.

I'm always amused by this story of the 'chapel that wasn't' as it seems to represent a peculiarly Northern Irish way of trying to solve a problem, the type of 'constructive ambiguity' some saw in the Good Friday Agreement, or the apparent 'constructive ambiguity' that seems currently to be animating discussions on how we might solve the problem of maintaining a soft border in Ireland, while the UK careers along its hapless pursuit of Brexit.

And Brexit reminds us of one of the reasons we are here: I am pleased to say that two of my colleagues from Queen's, David Phinnemore and Katy Hayward, have been doing some extraordinary research to explore the problems, and possible solutions, raised by Brexit for the island of Ireland. They presented some of their findings earlier this week to the European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs, but have been extremely active all year in their task.

This is a great example of a body of research that is not only directly exploring a key challenge for our society in Northern Ireland, but is being carried out in a way that its conclusions and implications are being addressed directly to and with the people who are in a position to have a key influence on decisions.

This is but one example, and there are many more. Indeed like you, we in Belfast have refocused our research strategy to concentrate on a series of grand challenges, or wicked problems.

WICKED PROBLEMS

The importance of these wicked problems lies not just in the scale of the challenge they provide; and not just in the way they require us to step outside the comfort of disciplinary frameworks. Rather, the importance of wicked

problems is that they require us to rethink the way we approach knowledge production and the role of partnership.

- Traditionally, knowledge production was something that happened in and for universities, the archetypal cloistered community.
- The approach of knowledge transfer followed from a recognition that some external groups could benefit from the work we did in universities, most notably in partnerships with business in the commercialization of knowledge.
- Later still, knowledge partnerships were formed as it was recognized that some external groups had access to knowledge that was also useful to us in the universities
- But for an engaged university, the goal is for knowledge co-creation, the recognition that not only do external groups have important knowledge we should work with, but also that they have a role in working with us, to shape and inform the research and learning processes themselves.

The task of co-creation means working in partnerships which consciously seek to provide mutual benefit. In this work, we in the universities bring something distinctive and important to the table, but other partners bring perspectives and experience that is distinctive and important as well. And when we are addressing wicked problems, we are all searching for new solutions to enduring challenges.

My academic background is in Education. I'm not sure if this is a tradition within other disciplines, but within Education a fairly standard approach to any given problem is to carry out research aimed at identifying 'best practice', with the implication that if you find 'best practice', tell everyone about it, and everyone does it, then everything should work out just fine.

But the implication of the concept of 'best practice' is that for any given problem someone, somewhere, has already found the answer, and the job of the researcher is simply to find them.

Most wicked problems are not like that. The problem is that no-one has 'the' answer, but lots of different people have bits of the solution, so the task is to connect all the dots that provide bits of the solution, and amplify those connections that seem to provide potentially useful ways forward. This is the approach sometimes called 'next practice'.

There are a number of things that follow from this:

- First, the idea of next practice highlights the need to work, creatively, towards innovative solutions: in contrast to the notion of best practice, which is akin to looking back over your shoulder, the notion of next practice implies that we are looking forward, looking over the horizon
- Second, if we are seeking to be creative, and to identify innovative solutions, we have to accept that not all our attempts will be successful. It is simply not possible to create space for innovation unless we allow for some tolerance of failure.
- And thirdly, this approach requires partnerships and networks, and the more diverse they are the better

The bigger point here, I suppose, is that engaged research and learning is not just morally satisfying, but often it is simply better and more effective, but there will have to be some level of cultural shift as you seek to embed engaged values into the University.

This is why it is so important that you have included engaged practices and criteria in your appointments and promotions systems. This provides important recognition of the priority attached to these values by the University.

But this should be the start of a process which seeks to embed engaged values more fundamentally into the very DNA of the University. There will, inevitably, be rules and procedures, sometimes of long-standing, which get in the way of effective partnership work. Identify those rules and procedures and, where you can, change them to rules and procedures which encourage and reward partnership and collaboration. The weakest argument for doing

something is the suggestion that 'it has always been done that way', but it can be surprisingly hard to look critically at long-standing practices.

STUDENTS AND LEARNING

The Netter Center in the University of Pennsylvania did this when it reimagined its relationship with its local community in South West Philadelphia by reconfiguring its relationship with that community through its approach to teaching. Traditionally the relationship between Penn and its local community had been mediated through the University police-force.

The Netter Center worked with local communities to identify teaching opportunities that would provide real and effective services for the local community, while offering students a chance to engage in real-world experiential learning. These type of service learning programmes were not simply about enhancing a student's CV as part of an employability initiative, but also had to provide tangible benefits for the communities in which they were placed.

This can only be achieved if the programmes are developed in collaboration and partnership with the communities. Once again, the criterion of mutual benefit is key.

In Queen's we have developed a similar type of initiative, though on a smaller scale, through the Science Shop. This acts as a brokerage between community groups and University Schools. The community groups identify projects, the results of which may be beneficial for campaigns and lobbying they are pursuing. The Science Shop connects these projects with Schools, so they can link projects to students, and provide them with opportunities to carry out accredited work on real-world problems.

But for engaged universities the potential of our work with students goes much further than this. So it is important to see the priority in your plan to address the broader issue of the civic values of students.

One opportunity to explore this in Belfast arose in an unexpected way. One of our PhD students was doing his research in disadvantaged Protestant communities in Belfast and discovered, perhaps unsurprisingly, that those communities had little or no link with Queen's, sometimes despite the fact that the communities lived very close to the University.

Rather than just accept this as 'the way the world was', he challenged some of us academics, as a result of which we invited community leaders from those areas, including a significant number of former loyalist paramilitary figures, to visit the University to open a dialogue on what we all might do.

Many of the community leaders drifted away from the process, but those that stayed had a clear and unambiguous passion for the importance of education in providing a better future for children from their areas. We explored what might be done, brought the Students' Union into the process, and collectively identified the need to establish a series of homework clubs through which students volunteer to support young people in those areas.

There have been a number of important mutual benefits from this work:

- It has transformed the relationship between those communities and the university
- It has provided our students with important insights into the inequalities that exist in our society
- And it has raised the aspirations and ambitions of young people from those areas

I suppose this example also highlights the value of serendipity. The homework clubs, in which hundreds of students now volunteer right across the city of Belfast, came about because of a series of unplanned steps. But it required there to be a willingness to address issues as they arose, and take advantage of an opportunity to develop new practice and new initiatives.

And I suppose there is also a lesson there about innovation: try to avoid the risk of being hamstrung by pre-set plans, and always have some mechanism for considering unexpected opportunities that might arise in this work.

CITIZENSHIP

One thing we haven't developed as much as I would like in Belfast relates more directly to the role of students as citizens:

- Across many countries in the world we are facing a rising tide of populist politicians, from the left and right;
- we sometimes seem to live in a world where experts and expertise are not only ignored, but belittled;
- and we live in a world where social media drives us into mutually reinforcing groups and becomes an echo chamber, rather than a place for dialogue

In many countries young people are those least likely to vote or participate in democratic processes. We need to think a lot more about how we work with our students not only to encourage a greater sense of civic efficacy, but also to promote the value of democratic engagement.

This is a particular priority for the Council of Europe. A key part of the Council's interest in engaged universities lies in embedding democratic culture among students in post-communist societies, many of whom will go on to hold leading positions in their countries.

For us, the rise of populism, the denigration of expertise, the emergence of a 'post-truth' politics all carry risks for the health of democracy. And as key civic institutions we need to think creatively on our role in addressing this challenge as well.

IN CONCLUSION

I have to say I am massively impressed at today's event.

I am massively impressed at the huge amount of work that has been undertaken to get to this point.

And I am massively impressed at the comprehensive and ambitious plan you have laid out today:

- It was developed through an impressive collegial effort across the University
- It covers all aspects of the university's activities, including a focus on the civic values of your students
- And it involved extensive engagement with local communities, and international expertise

Your goal is nothing less than to establish UCC as an internationally recognized site of excellence for civic and community engagement.

- The impressive way you have got to this point in developing your plan
- The critical and honest assessment of what you have achieved, and where you have to improve
- And the clear strategic priorities and goals you have laid out

All give me great confidence, and I'm sure give you great confidence, that your goal will be achieved.

Your plan is in place

Your commitment is clear

So now it's time for you to act