

Are the humanities threatened by the increasing commercialisation of universities?

A debate on this question took place in [Dublin City University](#) on 11 May 2006 between Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, the president of the university, and Professor Helena Sheehan.



(collage by HS)

Here is the text of the opening statement by [Helena Sheehan](#)

Yes, I believe that the humanities are threatened by the increasing commercialisation of universities.

The rate of change in universities today is almost dizzying. So much so, I think, that people hardly realise what is happening.

Universities throughout their whole history have been in flux, subjected to conflicting agendas and demands, not only by internal factors, but most characteristically by forces within the wider society. This has become even more the case in our own time.

For much of their history universities were bastions of elite education. The classes born to higher knowledge could do much as they pleased. There was little scrutiny or accountability. Academics had freedom to muse endlessly over the meaning of some obscure verse of romantic poetry or yet another piece of Berkeley paraphernalia, often at public expense.

This idea of the university came under massive challenge in the 1960s and 1970s. The pressure came from social movements demanding that universities open up to include those who had been excluded, not only in admissions, but in curriculum as well. The role of the university in society, the very foundations of academic disciplines, were subjected to the deepest scrutiny. Ideas sparked and passions flared in debates between contending paradigms in classrooms, common rooms and conferences. There was a demand for history from below, history from the point of view of the working class, of women, of the colonised. New fields came into being: gender studies, african studies, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies.

The energy of this engagement has subsided. It is not completely gone (and as long as I have breath in me, it won't, because it has decisively formed my sense of what a university should be). There are many reasons for this falling off. It is not as if any of the problems at core of these great debates have been solved or that contending paradigms have been defeated. Almost without anyone noticing, these debates been marginalised to near extinction by the dominance of neo-liberal ideology and its agenda of marketisation of universities.

A new orthodoxy has taken command, not so much by winning arguments, but by wielding systemic power on a global scale. Imperatives of decreasing public funding, commercialisation, privatisation, competitiveness are repeated & recycled as if there were no alternative. We should not concede that there is no alternative. There has never been such wealth in this country, yet we are told that public spending in education must decrease. Why? The demand for privatisation of public property, of the public sphere, is an ideological orthodoxy, not an economic necessity and it is not in the public interest.

What I am opposing here is not any commercialisation whatsoever, but the dominance of a culture of commercialisation and its effect on the idea of the university, the ethos of the university. What I am opposing here is the downgrading of epistemological and ethical norms & their displacement by market norms. What I am opposing is the death of the intellectual, the birth of the salesman, in our universities.

As academics our primary responsibilities are to seek truth and to serve society. Some academic activities might serve the national economy, but it cannot be the key driver of all teaching and research. Our core responsibility is to society, global society, and not to the economy.

It is not the market as such that I oppose. It is the dominance of the market vis a vis other forces, the inroads of the market into where it does not belong, particularly in core activities of education and health.

We all inevitably engage in commercial transactions. We buy our houses, clothes, cars, food, books and computers. We also sell. It is not only scientists with their patents and licences, but us and our books. We need to convince publishers not only that we have something to say, but that there is a market there of those who want to read what we write. So it is not as if we are naive about the market and our involvement in it. We accept a certain amount of commercial activity on campus, although I think that a salon where you can get a fake bake tan or fake nails is a step too far. The word 'fake' should be a good indicator here, I think.

What is really causing disquiet is the growing university-industrial complex, its threat to the intellectual integrity of the university, its erosion of the public sector ethos of the university.

As market priorities take hold, there is an upgrading of some disciplines and downgrading of others. Biotechnology and IT are up; history and philosophy are down. We don't even have departments of history or philosophy here. Not that such department are the only ways to carry these forward. But there is a waning of historical and philosophical consciousness and it has consequences.

The lowering of intellectual standards is sometimes stunning. For example, on the DCU website there is a declaration that Edward DeBono, who was recently appointed an adjunct professor here, is 'the father or thinking about thinking'. It is easy to get away with it when no one knows the history of philosophy any more.

A university is not a university without the humanities. Without the level of consciousness fostered by the humanities, we don't see the big picture, we lose the plot of the story in which we are living, we don't scrutinise the nature of the system generating the imperatives by which we live and work.

We need to scrutinise the new orthodoxies as much as we did the old ones, particularly the way market imperatives are driving teaching and research.

How is this affecting teaching? There is also a devaluing of teaching vis a vis research. At the same time teaching is becoming more demanding and subjected to questionable interventions, procedures and terms. I absolutely refuse to consider students to be customers and to enter into quasi-market relationships with them. Degrees are becoming too narrowly focused on turning out job ready workers with exact skills required by the market to the detriment of their having time to work out their world views and to study the nature of the system in which their work will be embedded.

As to research, there is a distortion of research by questionable priorities in research funding, but also by preoccupation with research funding. Why is every discussion of research dominated by the disparity between IRCSET v IRCHSS? I agree that it is important and it is a battle that must be fought, but I am worried about the way the agenda of research is being driven by funding. It is about much more.

Funding is increasingly being shaped by a market ethos, rather than a public service ethos, even when it is public sector funding. There is an erosion of a public service ethos from within the public sector, in the universities, in broadcasting, in the state itself. The private sector is parasiting on the public sector on a massive scale, utilising infrastructure and educational level built up in public sector and creaming off what it can use at cut price. I wonder if more is being invested in public infrastructure for commercialisation than income received from it.

DCU has invested in Invent as a commercialisation gateway and other universities, especially in the US, have invested in elaborate internal structures promoting and facilitating commercialisation. The EU's framework 7 has a scheme funding SMEs to buy what research they want from universities. So what is subsidising what? I ask. The CEO of Forfas was here last week and insisted that universities must adopt a pro-commercialisation culture and that the state must drive the commercialisation process. The aim, he said, was to have 1 or 2 Irish universities in the top 20 globally by 2013. Why? I asked. Because we must compete. He did not say why, on what basis, by what criteria, just that we must. DCU in articulating itself for its 25th anniversary and in its strategic plan has foregrounded the drive to be entrepreneurial and competitive.

Many of us find this alienating and we should say so. It does not represent what we are doing or what we should be doing. When I think about research, eg, I don't see myself as competing for Ireland. I think more of what I am doing more in terms of Marx in the British Museum figuring out how capitalism works than in terms of Roy Keane playing for Ireland in the world cup or Tony O'Reilly profiting by 60

million from the resale of eircom. I am obviously off message. The league tables for universities, the star system for researchers, off-the-scale salaries, ruthless careerism: these are not what have driven knowledge forward. They will not nurture wisdom.

Research is being judged by the funding it brings in even more than what it puts out. Outputs are assessed in terms of numbers of articles in specific peer reviewed journals deemed to be of high quality. This is producing a proliferation of mediocre research. So much of what I hear, read, review is so half-baked. Conceptualisation is weak and confused. Contextualisation is thin and random. Conclusions are bland and shallow. Writing is pretentious, clumpy, uninspired and uninspiring. It is not high quality. It is being driven by metric dashboards and promotion prospects and not by curiosity, exploration, conviction. We need to resist the macdonaldisation of universities and not produce MacDonald sponsored PhDs.

We need to ask how the funding of research in all areas is shaping the nature of projects, choice of methodologies, disclosure of results. There are worrying cases of slanting or suppression of results. There are conflicts of confidentiality v collegiality, private interests v public good.

Our criteria must be primarily epistemological and ethical, not commercial. We must give the questions: is it true? is it moral? is it socially useful? absolute priority over: will it sell? We cannot allow survival of the fittest in commercial competition to outstrip all other forms of validation: truth criteria, theoretical depth and breadth, moral responsibility, social engagement.

Our former DCU president in the Irish Times this week informs us that the humanities must fight back or face terminal decline. Most of us know this, but we need to think about what it is that we are defending and how we want to go about it. I agree with some of his proposals about including humanities in science degrees and vice versa. However, I do not agree that commercialisation of the humanities can be the cutting edge of our future. Some degree of it, short courses for professionals, content provision for new media, fine, but this cannot constitute our main line of advance. We have to produce what is worth advancing.

A primary task of the humanities is to scrutinise the dominant agenda of universities and the dynamics of the global system in which universities are embedded. We should look for whatever public support we need for doing that.

There is still space for critical, creative, systemic thinking in our universities, even if there are pressurising, corrupting, disincentivising pressures against it. How are we using that space? We may be witnessing a marginalisation of our disciplines within the overall scheme of things, but we will only accentuate this by playing the game as it is being presented to us, by capitulating to the dominant agenda, by trimming our sails, by producing the required metrics, by doing small studies and evading the big questions. The core activity of the university must be to seek truth and, when necessary, to speak truth to power.

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