

# The Essentials of a University Education

*A. S. Mowat*

IT is reasonable to suppose that any human institution which has more than a transitory existence answers some need and serves some human purpose; it is equally reasonable to suppose that any human institution which has a prolonged existence answers some basic human need and serves some unique purpose. Some human institutions, like the mediaeval craft guilds, have disappeared after a long history; others, like the mechanics' institutes of the nineteenth century, have had a much briefer though useful life; others, like the church and the schools, seem to go on forever. To the last class the university belongs.

In their modern form universities began in the eleventh century. By the thirteenth several great universities were already well established and have had a continuous existence down to the present day. A few of their offspring (like Montpellier) flourished only to decay and die, but scores of other sons or daughters now flourish all over the world wherever the impact of western civilization has been felt, and many have long and honourable histories. Indeed it has been held, and with reason, that the university is the most characteristic institution of our civilization and that "if you wish to destroy modern civilisation the most effective way to do it would be to abolish universities."

## II

LET us suppose, then, that universities do answer some basic need of humanity, some unique purpose, that they do have an essential task to perform that they alone and no other human institution can perform. And let us ask what this unique purpose is.

That the universities *do* have a unique purpose to perform I am quite convinced. At the same time I am sure that there are many activities rightly carried on at a university which, while admirable in themselves, yet are not the *essence* of university education; and I am equally sure that there are some activities which are most conveniently and even necessarily carried on at a university which yet contribute only indirectly to its essential function. We are looking not for what is done or can be done at a university, but for what is or should be done at a university *which is not done elsewhere*. We are looking for the university's peculiar and unique task. A teapot may be used to water the flowers, to dispense ginger ale, or even to store your life savings, but it was clearly invented to brew tea.

Perhaps we might begin by listing very briefly a few of those activities, which, though admirable in themselves, are, upon

reflection, clearly not the *essential* activities of a university.

(1) As some universities on this continent have recently found out through sad experience, it is *not* the essential function of a university to supply opportunities for sports, games and athletics. A university at which the only activities are football, basketball and swimming has clearly ceased to be a university, and one at which sports have assumed a disproportionate place has forfeited its birth-right. If (as they declare) the Harvard football team loses every Saturday, that only shows that Harvard, as a university, knows how to put first things first. If there are any universities which pass football players on one standard and non-football-playing students on another, they are, besides being grossly unjust, denying the very purpose of a university. If there are universities which survive only because of the money the football or basketball team brings in, that is no reason why they should fail to fulfil their essential function. It is unfortunate mainly in that it persuades sections of the public that a university is a place for training ball players.

(2) It must be equally plain that it is not the essential function of a university to give training in the social graces. We want university graduates, like others, to be polite and to be socially well-adjusted, but such adjustment is an aim of all educational institutions, including the family itself, and its achievement is obviously not only the university's task. We must not confuse the university with the "finishing" school.

(3) Nor is it an *essential* function of the university to further the emotional or aesthetic development of its students, although again it is desirable that their appreciative and creative powers should be developed while they are in attendance. It is perfectly clear that an institution which performed only the work of an art college, a music academy, a drama school or a school of journalism, or of any combination of those, could not be called a university.

SO far, I believe, no one would disagree, certainly no one who knows anything of universities. But we must, I think, go much further. In doing so we will admittedly be treading on more debatable ground. Briefly, I shall maintain firstly that neither preparation for the professions, nor research, nor scholarship is the essence of university education, and secondly that, none the less, the university is the proper place for education in the professions and that the unique purpose of university education can be attained only imperfectly without scholarship and research.

(4) In regard to the professions let J. S. Mill speak. The university, he says, "is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining a livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers and physicians and engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings." This is undoubtedly true, despite the fact that universities have always trained for the professions and will certainly continue to do so for a long time. The point made by J. S. Mill is that it is not the *essential* job of a university to teach techniques, methods or skills. Such a task may equally well be performed by the Technical College, the Business College, the Polytechnic or the Vocational School. Such institutions differ from a university in the narrow specialties to which training in them leads. But the more vital difference lies in the method of teaching; for while technical schools are concerned only with techniques and with immediate purposes and ends, the university must necessarily concern itself with more remote and abstract principles and purposes, principles and purposes which may appear to have little to do with the technical side of professional education. The vast increase in strictly technical or professional knowledge has posed one of the most critical of modern university problems, and the universities are themselves not altogether happy about the professional education they provide. How to *civilize* the prospective doctor, dentist, lawyer, engineer,



or teacher in addition to supplying him with the necessary technical knowledge is one of the problems we face.

AS Karl Mannheim has put it, "one of the reasons for moral breakdown is the mentality of the specialist who has remained a barbarian." It has often been thought (and the idea frequently put into practice) that the cure is to lengthen the professional course and expand it by the inclusion of some of the subjects commonly called "humanities." As Prof. Hardolph Wastenys points out in *Education for To-morrow*, this cure is seldom successful. The reason is, I believe, that this proposed cure is based on a misconception. The "humanising" or "civilizing" influence must come from the professional studies themselves. Indeed it seems to me that it is the very mark of a profession, as contrasted with other vocations, that the studies which are involved in preparation for it are capable of philosophical treatment and indeed cry out for it. The two oldest and best established of our professions are medicine and law. Is it not absurd to talk of adding humane studies to medicine which is at bottom a study of human nature, physical and mental, or to law which is at bottom a study of human behaviour? The real trouble is that professional study has sometimes been degraded to mere technicalities and the basic principles and problems left out. Professional courses are long enough as it is, and students are to be sympathized with, when they protest at their further lengthening. What they have the right to expect is that the professional subjects of study shall be taught from a broad and philosophical point of view.

(5) It has often been thought that research is an essential, if not the essential, activity of universities. As A. N. Whitehead puts it, the task of the university is "to transmit knowledge and to advance knowledge." With this statement we will not quarrel. Yet in a recent issue of the *Cambridge Journal* D. W. Brogan has argued very convincingly, and I believe correctly, that research is secondary. Brogan points out on the one hand that a

great deal of important research is carried on outside the universities by employees of governments or of manufacturing corporations, and on the other hand that an institution wholly devoted to research could not be called a university. Indeed teaching or what Brogan calls "influencing" is the university's primary function, and research important only because it leads to better and broader teaching. We should add that the idea, widespread on this continent, that a university teacher *must* engage in research and that his worth can be gauged by the number of his researches, has been far more productive of harm than good. It is a reproach to North American universities that the stream of research which issues from them each year contains so much that is ill-conceived, ill-planned and poorly directed. This is nowhere more evident than in the field of education where it is safe to say that at least fifty per cent of the researches reported annually are niggling, foolish and quite useless. It seems likely that much of it is produced because the researcher feels that it is expected of him, not because he has a problem of his own which he is anxious to investigate.

(6) We have argued that research is not the essence of a university nor is education for the professions. We shall now argue that it is not the essential function of a university to produce mere scholars. It is not enough merely to transmit knowledge. To quote Whitehead again, "The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively; a university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence." This indeed is widely recognized. No-one is more vulnerable to just criticism than the pedant and no-one is less representative of the true university spirit. It must sadly be admitted that universities sometimes fall short. As Sir Richard Livingstone says "It is possible to read history and get a history scholarship and an honours degree in it without divining the deeps that lie beneath laws and wars, diplomacy and institutions and hearing behind the tumult and the shouting the still sad music of humanity." Scholarship is not enough.

### III

WHAT then is the essence of a university education? In a word it is—philosophy. This is no secret. It is the opinion of J. S. Mill, Whitehead and Livingstone, as suggested by the passages quoted above. It is what Plato meant when he described the higher education of his guardians as one which would make them “spectators of all time and all existence.” It is stated explicitly by D. W. Brogan in the article quoted from above—“What we *do* need is the infusion of philosophical method and criticism into our university studies.” It is very clearly set down by John Henry Newman in *Discourse V* of his *Idea of a University*—“A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom; or what I have ventured to call a philosophical habit. This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a university, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. This is the main purpose of a university in its treatment of its students.”

On one point we must be clear. The saying that the essence of a university education is philosophy must not be interpreted to mean that every student must take Philosophy I and II. Something far wider and deeper is meant, nothing less than that *all* subjects at a university should be taught philosophically, that is, they should be taught always so as to reveal principles and fundamental problems, so as to arouse intellectual speculation on the broadest lines and so as to engender independent and thorough thinking on the part of the student. Basic philosophical problems underlie, and always will underlie, all subjects worthy of study at the university level. Students who learn the facts or the techniques, but never uncover the basic puzzles beneath, have not had a university education, though they may have attended a university. The student of languages who has never given thought to the nature of language in general nor the nature of the process by which meanings attach to words; the student of literature who

has never mused on the nature of the creative impulse; the would-be historian who learns his facts, his dates and his “movements” without searching in an attempt to discover why so often it is the innocent who suffer; the theological student who has never seriously pondered the arguments for atheism; the biologist who has never made an attempt to define the nature of life itself; the mathematician who is content to master and use mathematical techniques without considering the nature of number or of extension; the physicist or chemist who has never speculated on the ultimate nature of the reality with which he deals—all of those have failed to reach the essence of a university education. The same is true of the budding doctor or lawyer or teacher who has never looked below the practices of his craft, intricate though those may be. I once heard a very interesting and informative talk given by a psychiatrist on “Mental Health”, at the end of which he said something like this “We do not disturb the morals of the society in which we work. We accept them and try to bring our patients into harmony with the existing morality.” Coming from a professional man this was astonishing, for it meant that he had ceased, or had never learnt, to exercise his profession and had become a mere technician. No doubt this simplified considerably his day to day routine, but it is this very false simplicity that a university education is designed to prevent. The university-educated man must learn to look beneath the surface. I mean, of course, that such inspection shall be, not on a superficial level, which is common and easy, but on a profound level, which is difficult and rare.

Philosophical problems are by their very nature insoluble, that is, no complete or final answer can be given to them. They have been with us continuously ever since men began to think deeply, that is, at least since the days of ancient Greece, and they will remain with us in any foreseeable future. Philosophical problems may be likened to an unquenchable underground fire manifesting itself on the surface in patches of flame or smoke. Those patches cannot all be smothered completely though



some may be quenched for a time. But they can be discovered, recognized, studied, understood and controlled. Indeed they must be; and it is the university's peculiar task to do all of those things. If the university fails, our civilization is likely to go up in smoke.

It must be evident that this is the same as saying that the university is dedicated to truth; that "it must seek the truth and maintain the truth." It cannot serve any limited purpose or end. The true university believes that truth is one and indivisible, that there cannot be a variety of truths. It ceases to be a university when it willingly accepts dictation from any outside body which says "you may investigate; but your results must not contradict such and such a doctrine," or which grants permission to teach on condition that a certain propaganda line is followed. It must, as Socrates put it, hunt down the hare of truth wherever it may lead. It cannot be partisan. No doubt there should be limits to the academic freedom of the university teacher. If there are, any limitations should be imposed on the ground of overdogmatic assertions by the teacher, and not on denial of his right to expound any doctrine he sees fit.

#### IV

**I**F what we have said is a true estimate of the university's function, certain consequences follow at once:—

(1) The universities must be the home both of scholarship and of research, for without these the philosophical deeps cannot be reached. The more profound the scholarship and the more thorough the research the better. But the only scholarship that should be tolerated in a university is that which advances understanding of fundamental problems. The scholarship which deals with trifles, however interesting, or with superficialities, however charming, is intolerable and exasperating at university level. Similarly with research. It must be disinterested and fundamental, it must be directed by a love of truth, it must be designed towards the solution of general as well as specific problems.

(2) If what we have said about the essential nature of university education is true, it follows that only subjects capable of philosophical treatment should be taught at university. This has been excellently expressed by Dr. Eric Ashby, who says, "If the subject lends itself to disinterested thinking; if generalization can be extracted from it; it can be advanced by research; if, in brief, it breeds ideas in the mind, then the subject is appropriate for a university. If, on the other hand, the subject borrows all its principles from an older study (as journalism does from literature, or salesmanship from psychology, or massage from anatomy and physiology) and does not lead to generalisation then the subject is not a proper one for a university." Under this criterion there are excluded from university study not only those subjects such as poultry raising, hair-dressing and wrestling upon which Abraham Flexner poured his scorn as subjects for university study, but also others much more widely accepted such as Domestic Science, Manual Arts and Journalism, which are incapable of being taught philosophically unless they are converted into something else. Manual Arts, for example, such as woodworking and metal working cannot as such be taught philosophically. They do not touch any of the fundamental problems of philosophy and cannot be made to do so unless the manual Arts courses are converted into basic courses in the nature of the structure and growth of wood (Biology) or the physical and chemical properties of metals (Physics or Chemistry).

(3) Not all high school students are fitted to undertake university courses. In fact, under the present circumstances where large numbers of students go on to high school, only a minority are fitted for university work, for only a minority have the intellectual capacity to understand and grapple with those questions which are the essence of university education. No university really has the right to complain of the poor quality of its students. It should exclude by its entrance requirements those who are clearly incapable of profiting by a university education and it should weed out rapidly and ruthlessly

those who prove themselves incapable after they get in.

(4) It follows equally that universities should be relieved of elementary teaching and that students should arrive at universities only after having attained a satisfactory standard in the elements of the subjects they propose to study. This is probably a counsel of perfection. Universities have always done some elementary teaching for the reason that from time to time able students arrive who have been denied by circumstances the opportunity to study the necessary subjects. But no university should undertake to bring up to standard students who have failed matriculation subjects after a full high school course. The universities have more important tasks to perform.

(5) It is plain that the worth of a university must depend on the worth of its teachers far more than on anything else. A university may have magnificent buildings, it may have the most expensive kinds of apparatus for research, it may have playing fields, gymnasia, auditoria, a string orchestra, a winning football team, scholarships, handsome residences, a swimming pool—if it does not have teachers imbued with the proper university spirit, it is nothing. Such teachers must be scholarly. They must have a thorough knowledge of what they teach. They must have stood upon the frontiers of knowledge. They must be avid for truth which they must pursue by research in its usually accepted form or by thinking, which, as Samuel Alexander held, is a form and a very necessary form, of research. Above all they must have a broad and generous outlook. They must be tolerant of the opinions of

others; they should avoid dogmatism. This does not mean that they should refrain from expressing their own opinions. On the contrary the proper university teacher has clear and definite opinions of his own and is fearless in his expression of them. But he never forgets Oliver Cromwell's injunction "By the bowels of Christ, bethink ye that ye may be mistaken." He refuses utterly the methods of the propagandist. He is concerned not that his students should agree with his own opinions, but that they should learn to think for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions.

## V

THIS power of profound, objective and patient thinking, this devotion to the search for truth is, or should be, the university's gift to its students. It is the reason for the university's existence. He who has it develops his own philosophy of life, a carefully thought out and understood system of ideas and values; he who has it is humble, because he knows how difficult it is to approach objective truth; he is tolerant, because he is aware that he does not possess a monopoly of wisdom; he is the everlasting enemy of intolerance and tyranny because he knows that no man is infallible; he is impregnable to the influence of pressure groups, because he regards practical problems from the broadest point of view; he is above pettiness and he withstands with ease the vacillating winds of popular opinion.

If men of this type are valuable for our society, it is clear that we must look to the universities to produce them.

---

## *What a Difference!*

Communism is content that no man should be rich. Capitalism strives that no man shall be poor.