“Soft citizenship:” the university and civic engagement

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Introduction
Thank you for your invitation to address this very important meeting, and sincere congratulations on the achievement of the Charter for Civoc and Community Engagement.

I want to offer a perspective on today’s agenda that may appear a little unfashionable. The scholarship on higher education engagement has made huge strides in recent years, not least here in Ireland. It is also wonderful that a Head of State, your President Michael D. Higgins, has endorsed our central objective with such energy and incisiveness.

We now know much more than we used to about how exactly higher education institutions can enable societies to become more innovative and prosperous. The economic case for engagement has been effectively made – on both sides – not least by my companion as a keynote speaker today, Professor Barbara Holland. At the same time, the Irish system has established – notably through Campus Engage – a powerful and unassailable case-book of how projects and programs of civic engagement can serve positive purposes across a wide range of fields: of student and teacher development; of community cohesion and advancement; and of mobilization of civil society in general.

I want to return to an older theme in this discourse of engagement. It is about how universities relate to citizenship.

This involves tackling some really hard questions:
• There’s the historical question of how universities have related to the state.

• There’s the pedagogical question of what the university owes the state on the one hand, and civil society in the other hand, in terms of the formation and support of citizens.

• There’s the empirical and the philosophical question of the “scope” of citizenship.

• And there are the institutional questions of what universities should contribute as moral actors themselves.

I would like to make some remarks about each of these areas before offering a modest conceptual proposal about what we in higher education can do, and ought to be trying to do.

The university and the state
The formal question of who owns the university will differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

There are several quasi-regional models. Most influential is the framework provided by legislation and public funding (or its lack). This has led to distinctive systems emerging in:

• North America (a mixture of public and private institutions, with relatively relaxed approaches to institutional title and accreditation);
• Britain and the Commonwealth (with a strong presumption of official funding co-existing, sometimes paradoxically with higher levels of institutional autonomy);
• Continental Europe (with largely state-sponsored institutions given freedoms, including at faculty and departmental levels, which
governments are now trying to roll back, including through the transnational initiatives on qualification levels set since 1999 by the Bologna process); and finally

- a Nordic model, in which the presumption of public interest (and related funding) is probably the most advanced.

Newer state systems are apparently free to cherry-pick from these broad models, constrained though they are by demands for growth in student numbers and the precarious state of public finances. All systems will, however, pay lip-service to autonomy, wherever their money comes from. The theoretical high point of this argument was contributed von Humboldt, who saw the state served best by universities operating in "loneliness and freedom." We also have to cope with the iron law of disengagement and interference. As governments, around the world, wish to contribute less, they want to control more.

Above all, we know how these things can go wrong. I think Michael Daxner has got it most right when he talks about the role of universities in "society-building" rather than "state-building." Universities are needed, he says 'because of our dangerous knowledge.' The notion of 'dangerous knowledge' – that is of being critical as well as supportive of activities across civil society leads to moral injunctions for both states and their universities. To illustrate that this is more than just a theoretical issue, consider the current struggle in Iran for control of the Islamic Azad University, or in Egypt for the soul of Al-Azhar, founded in 970–2, and arguably today “the most celebrated educational institution in the Muslim world.”

The university and citizenship formation

Universities around the world rarely teach citizenship directly, although they may require an element of national service as part of the curriculum (especially in the global South – the North has a softer version of this in terms of “service education”). Schools do teach it (including under the title “civics”), and with mixed success (there is, for example a huge controversy today about the position “British values” in the National Curriculum). How you become a citizen (other
than by inheritance) is also relevant, and can be satirized (as the mandatory “Life in the UK” test often is).

What politicians, and some university leaders, are looking for here is a type of “common preparation” for what they regard as acceptable civic life. Bruce Smith and his fellow authors outlined this for the United States in a celebrated book, called Closed Minds? For them the goal of “a shared educational experience, a common liberal education, and preparation in the broadest sense for citizenship in our democratic society” has receded.

Democracies, in particular, can find this goal hard to deliver. In some national contexts, identity politics can become toxic, and leak into the university, as in ethnic preferences on selection. In others, higher education will become almost a part of national service, with a military flavour. In yet others, aspects of history, language, literature, and other disciplines with strong elements of partial heritage will loom uncomfortably large. The danger with the basic formulation (“common preparation”) is that – a little like Robert Putnam’s social capital – it lacks a critical edge.

Some of what it is about is learned inside the university world, by student contributions to governance and strategic prioritization. The student estate comes into play here. This is learning through doing.

Culturally there has been an almost universal assumption about student radicalism: students are meant to be idealistic and to want to change the world, and this has been expressed in different ways in different places and in different times. More recently this has been supplanted by a discourse – said to be more in tune with mass participation and economic stringency – of instrumentalism and ‘employability’. But, as usual, the story is more fine-grained and complex than at first appears. What may appear as students’ indifference to traditional (especially partisan) politics, may simply reflect transference of energy and attention to other issues and other ways of wanting to change things.
Several analytical zones are separable.

- The first is the extent to which student-based groups are an independent or quasi-independent force. It is very clear, for example, currently in Chile and Thailand that the major political parties and movements have to take account of what students and their leaders think and want.

- The second is the impact of student protest, about their own condition or that of others. Many societies in the North and West have been genuinely surprised about the scale and intensity (including violence) of protests against higher fees and other aspects of cuts in public support for HE. In Quebec the anti-fees alliance Classe brought down the provincial government. In Germany, students were at the heart of the movement that caused the Länder to back off on fees. Earlier examples of genuinely disruptive protest occurred in 2009 and 2010 in California, Austria, and the United Kingdom.

- Thirdly it is useful to establish the position of the university as a source of state support, opposition or, even in extreme cases of refuge. The latter arises most starkly in the case of Greece, where the controversy over the repeal of Law 1268 (which has forbidden the entry of police on to University grounds since 1982) rages on.

- Finally there is the transnational force of students as campaigners on specific themes such as the environment or social justice. Nowadays any significant ‘alternative’ or protest gathering does not take long before it establishes its own ‘university’.

The latter process links with at least two honourable traditions: the ‘free’ university, and heroic autodidactism. In each there is a strong seam of Paolo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed.” Thus the “tent-city” universities of the post credit-crunch ‘Occupy’ movement link back to the Free University of Berlin (founded in
1948 as a protest against the Soviet-dominated Humboldt University, and at the head of worldwide student protests in 1968). And thus, many of the registrations on MOOCs from poorer parts of the world, as well as the theory of Anya Kamenetz’ *DIY-U* and Dale Stephens’ *UnCollege* take us back to Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. A calmer, and more established, example is the UK’s University of the Third Age (U3A), with currently nearly 900 centres and nearly 300,000 learners.

**Cosmopolitanism and “global citizenship”**

At the heart of many of these issues is the new condition of the international campus. All around the world, university campuses have reverted to a position that they often occupied in their initial European phase of development: of being more cosmopolitan than the societies that surround them. Now with transport by aircraft and an intense international market for student recruitment, a majority of British universities have students from more than 100 countries. At the same time, traditional routes for student mobility have diversified radically. It is peculiarly satisfying in Oxford to see the portrait of the founder of the Rhodes scholarships and his contemporaries in the Masonic austerity of Rhodes House gaze down on the rainbow nation of today’s scholars.

Cosmopolitanism thus enters the picture. And as Kwame Anthony Appiah concludes in his *Cosmopolitanism*, the kind of “conversation” that structures higher education at its best is vital to value adjudication, especially in circumstances where “there are some values that are, and should be universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be local.”

However, the prospects and benefits of global awareness can be both under- and over-sold. The “international experience” offered by those countries most aggressively marketing undergraduate, and especially short-cycle and lucrative postgraduate courses, can seem hollow when the students who have travelled long distances find themselves in “enclaves” of their country-men and women, using their native language together, tactically managing the curriculum and assessment from this base, and above all failing to connect with either the rest of the university, or even their host society.
“English” has meanwhile become not only the language of the internet, but also the language of tradable international higher education, as well as a magnet for third parties to study in countries such as Germany and Sweden. Even France, and especially the Académie Française, is getting nervous, as the government seeks to relax a law (dated 1994) that requires all instruction to be in French.

A combination of worldwide recession, heightened security concerns (sometimes coupled with xenophobia, and even racism) and ICT has led to a paradoxical return of one aspect of nineteenth-century global HE. An overheated, air-travel-based market in higher education has been replaced by a new pattern of cooperation in the provision of HE (admittedly for shared economic interests) between first world, emerging market and developing countries. MOOCs are relevant here, as is the probable end of the bubble of establishing branch campuses (like the University of Nottingham’s Ningbo, China, established in 2004 – which remains an outlier, rather than a pioneer). Australian institutions, in particular, have discovered the costs of “teaching out” courses in overseas colleges that never met their ambitious initial recruitment projections.

Nor is this the only source of tension. Universities can find it hard to meet the requirements of different groups as they seek to maintain safe arenas for the discussion of hard questions; gender segregation at meetings is a current example. Governments can find it hard to square the circle of income generation and domestic security. Especially since 9/11, the clamp-down via visas and other border controls, designed to keep the community safe at one level (but at another often playing into nativist and intolerant hands), have had a particular impact on higher education. The principal cases are the United States, which found its supply of postgraduate students in science and technology almost terminally squeezed, and the UK. Canada has gone in a different direction, and is reaping the benefits.

Brain drain and brain exchange then enter the picture, with complex issues about students wanting to use HE qualifications to escape their origins, about
pressure on labour markets in a time of recession, and about the potential flight of professionally qualified people from poorer countries. Such economic pressures have all but drowned out an older notion of higher education opportunity as an arm of public diplomacy, with established systems taking pride in their education of future leaders around the world.

Institutional responsibilities

In this arena institutions are moral actors. Their articles of governance have a public purpose clause (occasionally explicit, always tacit). And they can behave well or badly. Universities strive to behave well: to be, as former Harvard President Derek Bok put it, “ethical beacons” in their communities. However, they can, and do fall below this high standard in big, in middling, and in what may feel as if they are little ways.

All around the world, there is evidence that universities can behave badly in big ways. These are often connected with a wider context – especially political – that is demonstrably corrupt. Examples are complicity with ethnic cleansing, religious and other forms of discrimination, and promotion of partisan political priorities and policies. In many of these circumstances those responsible inside the university plead force majeure. Institutions can find it hard to maintain their ethical compass in the face of pressures relating to funding (public and private), participation (not only who gets in as a student but also who gets the jobs), or just the ‘right people’ (including dominant ethnic and/or economic groups), as well as politics. If there is a rule, it is Daxner’s: that universities tend to operate more ethically when they are at some distance from the state but in tune with Civil Society.

In the middling zone are all sorts of questions about scholarly integrity. The siren call of business sponsorship operates here. A recent spotlight is on medical academics putting their names to articles “ghost-written” by drugs companies. Another concern centres on fund-raising. When there is money on the table – or even the whiff of money around the corner – institutions can lose their ability to make sound collective judgements. A recent example is the treatment by the
London School of Economics (LSE) of the doctoral candidacy of Saif Quadafi, son of the deposed Libyan leader. Several elements came together here: domestic political pressure, the history of the LSE and its leaders in advising an overseas regime, the prospect (and the delivery) of lucrative contracts, the use by a high-profile student of external consultants in the preparation of a thesis, and concerns about the standards set in a doctoral examination.

An increasingly sensitive area is marketing and the promotion of both institutions and courses, where the UK sector is waiting for a high-profile “mis-selling” case to be brought (indeed the Office of Fair Trading is now at work on this).

Meanwhile there are two other especially hot current areas of concern. The first is the intensification of institutional rivalry about research, not least because of the concentration of competitive funding. “Research integrity” is increasingly monitored and assessed by national and international bodies, and there is evidence that attention and adherence to the standards set by these is correlated both with positive outcomes and with reputation. Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe there is concern that progress in Chinese university research – the recipient of huge swaths of public investment – is being slowed up by patronage and scientific misconduct.

The second is the claimed collapse of student authorship standards in the face of the internet. Plagiarism now has a technical face, and the fear is that the teaching (and assessing) community will always be behind the game. We must, however, put student lapses into a context where their elders and betters might be said to behave just as badly. There is, for example, the delicate interface between graduate (or research) student and supervisor. Here there is not only evidence of bullying, broken promises, dashed expectations, power games, sexual exploitation, and a special form of intergenerational tension, but also a growing casebook of simple theft.
Finally, universities can also fall short of their ideals in *apparently smaller* ways, and when they do so the notorious slippery slope comes into play. Following Bok, several scholars have shown American institutions failing to live up to their ethical corporate ambitions. The problems identified have included: behaviour of sports teams, hazing, merit vs. need in financial aid, “legacy” admissions, brokering private funding, manipulating league tables, undermining free speech and academic freedom, and grade inflation.

Minor misdemeanours, failures of judgement, and especially their cover-up can escalate into a corporate culture of bad behaviour. Student groups are among the first to seize on the double standards of zero tolerance for students and apparently infinite tolerance for employees (especially academic staff). Some double standards are very odd indeed. Eric Schwitzgebel discovered that academic ethicists are the group most likely to steal books from their university libraries.

Before we get complacent, it is a mistake to assume that corruption is solely, or largely, a presence in the developing world or ‘Global South’, connected with the wider failures of governance, the mal-distribution of resources, and the absence of Western-style institutional and professional traditions.

The “first world” has its own problems. In France, the government has stepped in to take over the management of Sciences-Po, following a highly critical audit. In Germany two cabinet ministers stepped down in 2011 and 2013 because their doctoral theses have been found to be plagiarized. In Italy high levels of nepotism are seen as undermining scientific competitiveness. In Spain whistleblowers claim to have exposed widespread networks of research misconduct. Dutch higher education has been rocked by the unmasking of the social psychologist Diederik Staple as a career-long fraud, including in his own autobiography. Moving East, professors in prestigious Japanese universities can use the *juku* (crammer) system to increase their income and undermine open admissions. Moving South, the Israeli government has subverted its rules and
procedures on academic approvals to use a military edict to upgrade an institution (Ariel University) on the occupied West Bank. And so on.

Perhaps most dangerous to the higher education project is learned unawareness of the possibility and the actuality of corrupt behaviour. Many scholars have pointed out that academic communities are much better at critique than at self-awareness. By behaving well, and by taking care with their heartland business of telling truth not only to power but also to themselves, universities should be on the cutting edge of reducing (with a view to eliminating) corruption. It is a tough requirement, but one which we ignore at our peril.

And so to my “modest proposal.”

A modest proposal: university membership and “soft citizenship”
In terms of preparation for public life it is the “softer” qualities instilled by higher education that count. In making this case there are several major bodies of work that I can pray in aid. These include:

- Joseph's Nye's ideas about the “soft power” that goes with influencing rather than imposing, co-opting rather than coercing, and attracting rather than annexing. (Nye, 2004);
- there's the inventory of “soft skills” often connected with Daniel Goleman's popularisation of the theory of “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1996);
- another reference is to the concept of “feminine” leadership skills (as exemplified by some men as well as some women (Eagly et al. 2003);
- while yet another strand is the work on citizenship and environmental justice, summarized as “green political thought,” and led by Andrew Dobson (Andreotti, 2006).

I am trying to develop an alternative conception to the brittle, nationalistic version of
citizenship formation – for which ‘soft citizenship’ is a potential shorthand - and I suggest that universities are its natural seed-bed. The stress here is on not just self-awareness, but also awareness of others, and of deeper senses of sympathy and connection than civic conformity will ever bring about. In so far as institutions succeed in stimulating and nurturing it, they contribute to the more individual sense of personal responsibility and capacity for ‘public reasoning’.

The currently fashionable concept of “academic citizenship” plays a role, as does Howard Gardner’s exposition of the educational enterprise as a type of “commons.” Academic communities - at their best - stress ways of behaving, intimately connected with the scholarly enterprise which provide serious models of practice for the real world. More experienced learners can act as role models for the less experienced. Academic communities can also - at their best - supply safe environments in which conflicts (of ideas, of distribution of goods, or of political, social, and economic entitlement) can be worked out.

In summary, the rounded – or ‘soft’ citizen will have various valuable attributes: a sense of loyalty; a balance of scepticism and trust; a commitment to progressive engagement with wicked or intractable problems; and a presumption that knowledge can inform responsible action. All of these have been, and can continue to be nurtured by the university.

At the heart of this is what Amartya Sen eloquently calls “public reasoning.”

I think most teachers in higher education would – if pushed – agree that they are working to a core curriculum at a high level of generality. As you study at this level you try to answer some hard questions, some hypothetical, some not. You learn how to work with other people, dead and alive, directly or indirectly (through their work), present or remote. You meet deadlines. You ask yourself why you are doing this, and what difference doing it well will make, for yourself and for others. You get a certificate (as a whole, or in stages). You take out a membership. In this way higher education’s purposes come together in terms of
self-creation and the authentic life, the habit of thinking deeply, and the capacity to connect with others empathically.

At the end of the day everyone makes sense of his or her own higher education, not necessarily immediately, and in some cases not for a considerable time. You don’t have to buy the full proposition if you don’t want to; there is a definite ‘conscience clause’ (away from doctrinal study) that says that no one can make you take away what you don’t want to. You are, however, compelled by an authentic higher education experience to practise answering difficult questions. You are given a safe place in which to do so. Depending on your subject or discipline (or combination of these) you will gain a powerful evaluative toolkit. You will be required to communicate what you have learned. This is hard work, but for centuries participants have found it to be immensely satisfying and it has, generally, helped to make the world a better place.

Other people have spotted this core curriculum in action. Let me close with two rather different witnesses. The first is the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (now a Cambridge College head and a University Chancellor), writing in the *Times Higher* about the current UK buzz word “impact”:

> The most important bit of ‘impact’ any university course can have is to help people to become intelligent citizens – and that means helping them to see what a critical argument looks like, and to see what genuine thinking is...Learning to appreciate that good thinking is both diverse and convergent, and that it works in many different ways, but is always characterized by rigorous self-awareness and self-challenge, is essential to a healthy public life (Williams, 2014).

The second is the philosopher and *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Wolff writing recently about being on jury service:

> As we painfully sifted through the evidence, it became clear that there were some people who came to a view early and stuck fast. Then there
were others who wanted to find out what to think, and switched from side to side as the balance of evidence shifted. Those in the first group made many good arguments and presented their ideas forcefully, but they seemed relatively inflexible. They sometimes did change their minds, but it was a momentous event. Those in the second group welcomed challenges because this helped them test their ideas. They discussed the evidence in an open and balanced fashion, often switching position. Most of the people in this more flexible group were university graduates. They were able to make the distinction between criticising an argument and criticising the person who makes it. In other words, they were adept at de-personalising arguments. It wasn’t only the graduates who did this, and some graduates were as stubborn as anyone, albeit in impressively inventive ways. But, on the whole, three years of finding out that your arguments are not as good as you think, and that you should go and take another look, seems to have some benefits after all (Wolff, 2014).

I have said that mine is a modest proposal. One of the frequent faults of research on higher education is its reductionist quality. Singular interpretations of what is going on have to be right. But those of us who live and work in these peculiar institutions know that they never are. It’s both the joy and the frustration of the academic enterprise that it can sustain multiple narratives.

I’ll give two examples. The first is the controversy around higher education participation and social mobility: has expansion “locked-in” the special effects of attending one of a small number of elite institutions, or has it opened up opportunity more generally? It seems to have done both. The second is the debate over the “wider benefits” of higher education: is there a causal relationship between the education experience and graduates’ higher rates of health, happiness and democratic tolerance, or is it a mere association? (see BIS 2012).

We need to decide which of these contending narratives are more valuable and to try to nurture them. “Soft citizenship” is, I suggest, another important internal
narrative and worthy of careful attention. I believe it should be at the heart of university-civic engagement. I wonder if you agree. Thank you for listening.

References

Note: the majority of the references in this lecture can be found in Watson, D. (2014) *The Question of Conscience: higher education and personal responsibility*, especially Chapters Five and Seven. London: IoE Press.

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