Global Tunes and National Melodies: being global and sounding local

## *A speech delivered by Professor David Eastwood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, at the Lord Dearing Memorial Conference at the University of Nottingham on 17th February 2011.*

## Traditionally a university has been defined by, indeed defined itself as, a place. Its architecture and its very physical conception embodied its form. In the medieval and early-modern periods, God and scholastically-revealed knowledge was at its centre, so the chapel dominated. Then, following the example of the eighteenth-century German *Aufkärung* tradition, Thomas Jefferson boldly put the library at the centre of his University of Virginia in Charlottesville. With this a new symbolic notion of the university as a place was born, with secular knowledge, and increasingly contested knowledge, at the heart of the university.

## Where libraries led, laboratories followed, and the university as a site for science was born in the nineteenth century. The laboratory as a place has been profoundly important, partly because of the infrastructure of science itself, but partly because of the hierarchies within science. Thus labs are Professor so-and-so’s lab, scientific apprenticeships are served in professors’ labs - a home of a group, to be sure, but a *place* none the less.

## The geographies of universities are complex. There are places of residence, of teaching, of study, and of a rich intellectual hinterland. People ‘go to’ universities, many still reside in or near them in order to learn; and scholars locate their research in universities, even in a world where the virtual might have made place seem less important. In systems that allow it, students will pay, and pay prodigiously, to study in places, placing a premium on the real, the immediate, and the academic experience as meditated in and through a particular academic environment. The Harvard experience is Harvard in Cambridge Mass. However generous it is with its on-line content, that is not the Harvard experience, but a tantalizing fragment of it, offered out of context. Not valueless, of course, but different.

## Moreover, places make universities and universities make places. Take my own university, founded in 1900 as the final symbol of Birmingham’s municipal greatness and global ambition. It was conceived as a civic university to elevate its city and to proclaim Birmingham’s greatness to the world. Take this university, founded by a distinctive local wealth and civic ambition, and, like my university, inhabiting a very particular and defining setting.

## This kind of model of great cities with great universities and complex inter-relationships is common, but almost equally common and profoundly interesting are universities that create company towns. The great universities of Germany perhaps first modelled this – go to Tubingen now and you see it. Oxford and Cambridge offer a variation on the theme, with Lord Nuffield’s most enduring monument being a college rather than an industry, and Cambridge always having been a company town, albeit now with suburbs of spin-outs. Think of Princeton, a great university in a tiny town, with a hotel that probably boasts the most intellectually distinguished concentration of guests anywhere in the world. Think, too, of the ways in which the location of powerful universities has reshaped cities and city economies. Boston because of the prodigious concentration of great and fine universities; Cambridge England because of the sheer richness of the ideas which tumble out from the university that dominates the town. California offers a regional paradigm where a new economy was incubated in, and then sustained by, its universities.

## I could go on, but I am sure you understand my key point. Place matters, and however universal knowledge might be or become, however borderless the world of ideas might be, a university has had and still has a profound, a defining, physicality, and normative location.

## From the particularity of location has flowed the particularity of provision. Universities have characteristically admitted the students they choose, to academic programmes they have constructed, and then assessed them through examinations that are locally administered and assessed. I realize there are exceptions, but broadly this model holds. To study at a particular university means to study in a unique setting, on a distinctive programme, through active engagement with teachers employed by that institution. The profundity of that experience for many (though I agree not all) leads them actively to want to return to their *alma mater*, literally to revisit their memories and to re-encounter classmates in their university setting. Nowhere is this more powerful than at the most prestigious universities where learning, place, and later memory has a powerful and persistent influence on *alumni.*

## So what does this mean in a world where higher education is increasingly globalized, and many of us leading major universities think long and hard about our international or global strategies?

## Interesting it has not led to a flight to the virtual. In the international higher education market, those who have means or those who can command scholarships prefer to travel and to locate themselves in sites of learning. Hence the massive and mobile international market for HE. Students seek the authenticity of the university experience. On the assumption that consumers act broadly rationally, why do students pay a premium for the University of Birmingham experience when they can have the University of Phoenix experience for rather less cash and much less disruption?

## The answer, of course, is that they see the University of Birmingham experience as much more than an encounter with knowledge.

## They want the encounter with teachers, they want what we now call social learning experiences, they want to interact in very particular ways with the infrastructures that support learning, they want to inhabit spaces where research is undertaken and disseminated, and, crucially, they want to buy-in to a university experience that is more than just a learning experience. The university as a social community, and a set of societies; it is equally a cultural community, with values, with cultural assets, and its own cultural productions. Students want this wider, deeper, more pervasive and profound experience of higher education, indeed they presume – rightly – that this is what makes higher education a transforming experience as well as a series of academic encounters and challenges.

## So the advent of globalized higher education has not undermined the importance of place and the attraction of studying at – rather than through – a particular university. Others forms of open learning are different, complementary forms of learning, well adapted to some students, part indeed of an expansion of higher education, not through the development of a dominant new paradigm.

## If you doubt that, consider how much the leading universities spent in the last decade on their estates. Consider how this university invested here at its Nottingham campus, whilst developing two major overseas campuses.

## Moreover, leading universities in particular compete in the international market not on the generic but on the distinctive. True the general brand of British, Australian, or US higher education matters, but our own distinctiveness matters more, and if you think through our marketing strategies it is their very distinctiveness that is most striking. This seems to me to be equally true of in-country provision overseas, and here I am struck by the branding or presentation of this University’s overseas campuses, very much as part of the University of Nottingham group, defined (and, crucially, NOT merely quality assured) by that which is quintessentially Nottingham. The advent of the global has not made the local or, if you prefer, the institutionally particular, any the less important.

## And herein, I think, is a central paradox of higher education’s experience of globalization.

## Whereas other facets of globalization have led to homogenization, often to the progenitors of new technologies or retail forms first being emulated and then been out-competed; higher education has seen something different. In countries which can afford it – China, most notably – quite prodigious investments are being made in universities which seek to emulate the best, and emulate them in quite traditional ways: as physical entities, with considerable real estate, with patterns of residence and local participation, and quite traditional infrastructures for teaching and research. True there are more social learning spaces, everything is pervasively wireless, but in that they are doing no more than anticipating what we will do, not creating quintessentially different universities.

## Of course the private and the virtual is developing more rapidly in these developing higher education systems, but generally at the bottom of the market and as supplementary provision or provision that competes on price, rather than as the defining characteristic of apex of new higher education systems.

## And all of that is abundantly clear when you look at postgraduate and research provision in new higher education systems, all of which is closely focussed in a small number of elite institutions with elaborate infrastructures.

## So to prosper in the new global higher education we are developing a striking new hybrid which infuses the global with the local. To understand this is to understand the art of prospering in a globalized higher education environment. It is not about subordinating but about promoting individual identities in an increasingly competitive market place. Not all institutions can or will wish to do this, and international higher education, like national systems of higher education, will become increasingly characterized by mission differentiation. Wise institutions will choose which markets they can compete in, and will attend prudently to their comparative advantage. Others, especially the leading research universities, will and must think global, recruit globally, compete globally, but be recognizable and distinctive in that global environment.

## I realize that there is much in this analysis that some may think Burkean or even complacent. That, though, would be to miss the underlying thrust of my message. My core point is that there isn’t some simple new paradigm – the global university – which if we were all to embrace we will assuredly succeed. Just as there isn’t some simple formula which internationalizes our curriculum, our student experience, and our research base. Find the formula and you have the alchemy of success.

## Actually my central message is altogether more astringent. International higher education is here, and here in a quite aggressive form. Our competitors are spending more, building more, and in some cases already researching more. The price of competing effectively, and the efficiency demanded, is going up year-on-year. The price of talent, the essential life blood of all universities and particularly of research universities, has never been higher, and is set to rise still further. To compete is difficult enough, and may yet be near impossible if governments, as the US did briefly after 9-11 and ours may yet do, place domestic moral panics over immigration ahead of real national interests and the free flow of people.

## Fundamentally, though, to compete effectively we must recognize what we are. In the main we are long-matured universities with defining histories, powerful identities, and huge assets in our inherited sense of place. We should not repudiate that or undersell it. If we do we compete without a distinctive identity against universities that have greater resource and highly ambitious governments and societies sitting behind them, we will lose and deserve to lose. Our comparative advantage is that we can rework the local in the global environment, and we can present the great heritages of our leading universities and the surest guarantees of their futures and thus of the future value of degrees held from them.

## Lest you think this play on the local in a world of globalized higher education fanciful, I commend to you the Strategic Framework of my own university which began, explicitly from our thinking through a triptych of Birmingham civic, Birmingham national, and Birmingham global. As we did so the interconnections between those spheres of activity and those aspects of our past, present, and future became ever more powerful.

## You may or may not find the outcome compelling, but it is a working through, for one university, of the challenges and opportunities that I have been outlining this morning.

## Just before Christmas I was bestowing an honorary degree. The recipient in her speech of acceptance recalled how she had first seen the University of Birmingham, with its great buildings and soaring tower where she was with her parents on a barge holiday at the age of 15. She insisted they moor up and walk to this place. She determined then that this was the university she wanted to come to. She was moved to tears as she recalled the memory of her first encounter with the place and feel of our university. She came, won a first, and said her life was transformed by Birmingham. It was, in its way, surprising that she was in tears because this was Chrissie Wellington, the world ironman champion, who has won every ironman event she has competed in, successively reduced the world record, through active feats of physical endurance that are quite awesome; and has a handshake of quite frightening firmness. She is also an international ambassador for development and a campaigner for social justice and human rights on a global scale. She is truly a global citizen and an icon of our global village. And it all started by glimpsing a place and studying at a university. From global success she returned to a very special place, and wept. To understand that is to understand why place matters, why universities matter, and why global universities must be true to themselves or they will lose that which is, in every sense, most valuable.

## David Eastwood

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