What is the point of an Art University?

By Simon Willmoth

This short article is the slightly amended text of a keynote talk presented at the Swedish Research Council's symposium on Artistic Research 'The Art University – political dream or broadened future for thearts' in Malmö on 25 November 2015.

I want to highlight three areas relevant to the contemporary Art University in order to: identify some particular challenges that are shared by all universities in the UK and are relevant to universities across Europe; to indicate the contributions Art Universities make to society; and begin to outline why Art Universities can be a 'great help out of our present difficulties' to quote Matthew Arnold from 1869. [1]

These three areas are:
● The regulatory frameworks that universities have to work within;
● How Art Universities meet societal needs and challenges – the productive knowledge they generate;
● Why Art Universities must value disinterested knowledge and critical distance.

Regulatory Frameworks

The proportion of public funding contributing to UK universities' income has been reduced considerably in the last ten years. However, the regulation of universities by government agencies has not been reduced but actually increased over this period. The main agency governing this regulation in England is the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which oversees annual surveys of student satisfaction and University Knowledge Exchange, as well as the sexennial audit of university research – the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education monitors the standards and quality of UK universities with evidence-based review visits to each university every five years. Among a number of other financial and legal reporting requirements, universities also have to report to the UK Border Agency on international students and to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on student and staff numbers, income and expenditures. [2]

1 Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), 5

2 http://www.hefce.ac.uk, http://www.qaa.ac.uk
http://www.thestudentsurvey.com, https://www.hesa.ac.uk
http://www.ref.ac.uk, https://www.gov.uk/tier-4-general-visa/overview

There are also national guidelines for aspects of university research infrastructural support that are agreed upon by Universities UK – concordats to support the career development of researchers; to support research integrity; and for engaging the public with research.

This regulation of universities and the resulting audit culture is part of the marketization and corporatization of the British university over the past twenty-five years, informed by management systems originating in American business schools, such as 'management by objectives', 'benchmarking' and, perhaps most influential of all, the 'Balanced Scorecard' (BSC) – which raised the significance of 'Key Performance Indicators' (KPIs).[3]

UK universities are currently going through a period of great change and accelerated privatization. Reports and enquiries for new structures and recommendations for monitoring university teaching and research activity are a growth industry, resulting in a number of major proposals in 2015 alone.

The Dowling Review of Business-University Research Collaborations[4], published in July 2015, examines how government can support the development of more effective collaborations between businesses and university researchers in the UK. It was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) as part of the UK Government's science and innovation strategy (published on 17 December 2014).

The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management, also published in July 2015, considers the use of metrics in the assessment of research (including for the next Research Excellence Framework evaluation) and to inform university management systems, and it highlights 'the growing power of league tables and rankings'. [5]

The UK Government Green Paper on Higher Education – *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* – was published on 6 November 2015. The paper proposes major changes in the UK national framework for higher education, including replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Quality Assurance

3 Simon Head. 'The Grim Threat to British Universities', The New York Review of Books, 13 January 2011: 58-64

4 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-university-research-collaborations-dowling-review-final-report (accessed 24 October 2015)

5 James Wilsdon, et al. (2015). The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management: vii. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4929.1363

Agency with new regulatory bodies and systems – the Office for Students (OfS) and a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), proposals which it suggests will 'put students at the heart of higher education'. [6] The paper makes much of the need to reduce 'regulatory burdens', but the new structures and auditing procedures that it only very broadly outlines will certainly increase the burden of regulation on universities and further increase government control of teaching and research.

Ensuring a Successful UK Research Endeavour published on 19 November 2015, is a review undertaken by Sir Paul Nurse of all of the UK Research Councils that are part of the British dual funding support system for research. The report recommends that a new body 'Research UK' be established to oversee the work of the UK Research Councils. In the Comprehensive Spending Review announced on 25 November 2015, the UK Government indicated that it supports Nurse's recommendations.

Finally, for 2015 at least, on 16 December 2015 the Universities and Science Minister announced a UK-wide review of the Research Excellence Framework chaired by Lord Nicholas Stern, President of the British Academy and former World Bank Chief Economist. The review 'will help ensure the government gets the most return from its investment' in research.[7]

I would not suggest that *all* these reports, standards and monitoring mechanisms are negative, even though they are clearly disciplinary technologies in the Foucauldian sense.[8] Universities should account for the public funding they receive, and a certain amount of quality monitoring can inform university planning and strategy. However, the demands on university structures and staffing, and the sheer amount of regulation and reporting, inhibits innovation, creativity and research activity – thus it is counterproductive to the very aims that governments claim they wish universities to pursue. Moreover the criteria and structures for reviewing, monitoring and auditing over time determine the kind of work being undertaken by universities. To an extent, these mechanisms replace the activities of teaching and research, which have to be partially suspended to collect, analyze and select data to submit to the audit.

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6 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/student-choice-at-the-heart-of-new-higher-education-reforms (accessed 13 November 2015)

7 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-review-to-improve-university-research-funding (accessed 16 December 2015)
8 Cris Shore, 'Audit culture and Illiberal governance: Universities and the politics of accountability' Anthropological Theory: 8(3) (2008): 283.

In a world increasingly obsessed with regulation and accountability, at least in relation to public funding, how can Art Universities support, foster and protect innovation and creative endeavours?

Although audit culture seems to flourish in inverse proportion to the amount of critical discourse a society engages in, I would not suggest that governments and funding bodies are necessarily obsessed with control for its own sake. Governments and their agencies are in the business, quite rightly, of maintaining a credible illusion of structure and of presenting solutions in a world of increasing complexity and interdependency in which identifying patterns and anticipating trends is undermined by a seemingly ever-accelerating rate of change and mutability.

Art Universities must build structures and procedures that enable creative and critical practices rather than inhibit them. We should resist the political expediency of simplistic solutions to complex problems. We must continue to assert that 'the openness to contradiction … is part of the genius of the university'.[9]

Productive Knowledge

A central role for universities is to contribute to economic growth and social cohesion. We have a responsibility to ensure that students have the skills and knowledge to affect change and respond to change, as well as to develop careers and create jobs. The report of the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth*, published in February 2015, makes the point that 1.7 million people in the UK work in the creative and cultural industries –identified as fashion, architecture, publishing, craft and design, film and TV, video games and software, museums, theatre, dance, popular and classical music and the visual arts.[10]

These industries contribute £7.7 billion to the UK economy annually and represent at least 5% of the UK economy. The report also notes that, according to the latest figures, this sector has the highest growth rate in the British economy (9.9% in 2013) and that allowing for the contribution of creative talent *outside* the creative industries, the creative economy's share 'may be approaching one-tenth of the UK's economy'.[11]

9 Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas, 'What are universities for?' Chinese Science Bulletin, 56 (2011): 2507, DOI: 10.1007/s11434-011-4608-7

10 Vikki Heywood et al, Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth, The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value (The University of Warwick, 2015).
11 Heywood et al, Britain, 12.

Of course Art Universities address societal needs and challenges in more ways than through economic growth, most obviously by orienting their curricula and research to these challenges. UK universities have demonstrated the impact of their research, both through the Pathways to impact that have to be identified by any application for funding to UK Research Councils and the Impact Case Studies that were submitted to the REF.

REF 2014 defined impact 'as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'. In total 154 UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) submitted 6975 impact case studies, which concentrated on the significance and reach of the impact of their research, for assessment to REF 2014. I want to identify two points from the analysis of these impact case studies that relate to the value of the Art University.

The report on REF Impact Case Studies prepared by King's College London and Digital Science, published in March 2015, stated: 'Impact in the arts was achieved through participatory research and media coverage...

involving students and members of the public in performances, or to reflect on their experience ...; creating networks for public debates; connecting practitioners to analyze their work and learn from shared experiences'.[12] In other words, arts researchers involve people and work with them and with each other, encouraging engagement and debate.

The other point I would highlight was made in the overview report by the peer group assessing research in the Arts and Humanities in REF 2014 *Sub panel 34: Art and Design: History, Practice, Theory.*

This report identified that a significant amount of research in art and design was interdisciplinary, indeed that the art and design research assessed for REF 2014 referenced every other subject discipline assessed as part of the research audit: 'This included, at one end of the spectrum, medical and engineering science, and computer technology, and at the other, philosophy, history, anthropology, and ethnography'.[13] Noted that 'The sector is a leader in interdisciplinary research'.[14]

13 HEFCE, Research Excellence Framework 2014: Overview report by Main Panel D and Sub-panels 27 to 36 (2015), 84.

14 HEFCE, Overview, 85. See also Malcolm Quinn, 'Auditing research in the arts: constructing a model of the university' (Paper presented at the Society for Artistic Research Conference Unconditional Love, Chelsea College of Arts, London ,1 May 2015). http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/7706/

12 King's College London and Digital Science, The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact: An initial analysis of Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 impact case studies. (Bristol, United Kingdom: HEFCE 2015), 59

This relates to an insight by David Cross, an artist and Reader at University of the Arts London, who claims that 'art is not a discipline - it's like a solvent that dissolves boundaries' [between subjects and ideas].[15]

Art Universities must lead in promoting the value of the creative economy and the importance of the 'soft power' of the influence of culture in the world to governments and policy makers.

Art Universities should be models of social inclusion in the diversity of their students, staff at all levels, and in their governing body. Incidentally, perhaps Art Universities should ensure that a number of artists, designers and other creative practitioners are represented on their governing body.

Art Universities must also broadcast and further develop their leadership in research that is interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and postdisciplinary.

Disinterested Knowledge

Just as important as being the site of Productive Knowledge that addresses social needs and challenges is the role of the Art University as the site of the production of *Disinterested Knowledge;* that is disinterested in terms of social usage. Perhaps this is *more* important as a focus because the value of this role has been so eroded over the past thirty years.

The discourse of regulation and accountability means that universities increasingly become instruments of national policy focused on a particular vision of social change and economic prosperity.

Measuring academic performance, the notion that academics are 'service providers' to students who are 'customers', and an audit culture all increase the tendency for academics to stay within established boundaries, to not challenge the status quo (university management or in the subject discipline), to be risk-averse and less innovative.[16]

15 David Cross, (Panel discussion at SHOCK CITY: Resilience & The Anthropocene, Chelsea College of Arts, London, 28 October 2015).

16 http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/dec/18/my-students-have-paid-9000-and-now-they-think-they-own-me? (Accessed 18 December 2015)

Universities are locations of subject knowledge but, importantly are also where subject meaning is contested and critiqued. It is this role of universities as institutions of critique both for subject disciplines and for society, as well as models of debate and decision-making, that has been significantly eroded.

As well as productive knowledge, Art Universities must also encourage and support forms of knowledge that resist being transferable and exploitable. We need to value forms of knowing that allow the unknown to come into being without possessing it. Art Universities must maintain at their core a mission to creatively and critically explore how and why things are and to show how things can be otherwise, to be institutions of critique, to celebrate difference, encourage hybridity, ambiguity and complexity and disparage over-simplicity, templates and repeating past models of innovation.

Conclusion

Art Universities must negotiate the difficult balance between meeting the demands of the regulatory frameworks imposed on them, addressing social needs and societal challenges and yet remaining independent – encouraging disinterested, apparently useless, knowledge and changing society in ways it has not predicted, developing skills and expertise that employers haven't identified or anticipated as necessary, and embracing futures that are not yet knowable.

Are we achieving this balance or have Art Universities become privatized knowledge corporations primarily focused on objectives and targets driven by governments and business?