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The value of values. On Catholic universities today

“And he went around doing good “(Acts 10:38)

“He gets degrees in making jam
At Liverpool and Birmingham.”
Oxford Broadsheet around 1914

I – The value of higher education

In our uncertain times, it is not uncommon to take a fiduciary approach to any conversation around ‘value’. And this goes for universities as well. Common descriptions of what a university does often resort to comparison. Hence they are defined as ‘factories of knowledge’, or as ‘ a marketplace of ideas’ (Louis Menand), i.e. a place of exchange and negotiation, where the complexity of the social fabric is reflected in the successful dialogue of disciplines and methodologies. What we have witnessed in the recent past is the growing awareness that a university – as a complex organization – be it public or private, is held to high standards of responsibility and accountability, not least with its students, whose quality speaks to the wider impact of the institution. And how do we do this? As Benjamin Ginsberg has noted in *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why this Matters*, university strategic plans, instead of identifying unique strengths and future directions, are nearly identical. Stefan Collini in *What are Universities for?* warns that Edspeak has colonized our minds. Our research is to be competitive, ground-breaking, cutting edge, relatable, applicable, impactful, transferable, profit-generating and ... easily packaged for media dissemination. In our day and age the university is dangerously drawing close to the **factory. It draws on normalization** with the rule of measurement and impact, the stress on outputs and on the materiality of value creation. This happens as the university is increasingly seduced by the glamour of the entrepreneurial ideal ruled by models of efficiency, growth and innovation.

In addition, the monetization of the value of education becomes particularly relevant in political and social discourse. The OECD *Education at a Glance 2019 Report* clearly highlights the material benefits of higher education, reflected in **higher employment rates** (85% of adults with a university degree are employed compared to 76% with secondary education); **higher earnings** (25 to 34 year old professionals earn on average 38% more than those in the same age group without a degree while amongst those 45 to 54 year old the difference spikes to 70%

more for university graduates) and also **more resilience to long-term unemployment**. Amongst long term unemployed adults roughly 29% have a degree compared to 36% without. A survey conducted in the UK by Lancaster University suggests that the increase in earnings for graduates over a lifetime is for men 28% and for women approximately 53%.¹ Other than the value for money a university education affords, the OECD indicators also provide evidence of social outcomes. The study suggests that adults with a university education irrespective of geography, age, gender or ethnicity, perform better in health indicators and in general report more desirable social outcomes, such as participation in volunteer activities, interpersonal trust, and civic involvement.

And yet, though in our material times, the social and economic value of university education seems to be unassailable, because notwithstanding the regional differences the enrollment in higher education is steadily rising (in OECD countries alone the number of graduates rose 9% from 2008 to 2019) and the global flow of tertiary education students is growing, despite all these apparently positive trends, the uncertainty regarding the future of university education is here to stay. Under the strain of four main forces, the value of university education is dangerously embracing an as yet new stage of the traditional useful/useless debate. These four drivers are: technological innovation, radical professionalization, globalization and the institutional disruption of the knowledge society.

1. **Technological innovation and digital transformation** challenge educational models, add stress to human resources and place finances under duress. Technology is rapidly disrupting the medium of instruction, forcing universities to adapt traditional one-to-many presence-based classes to tech pumped models in many-to-many learning environments, boosting the use of video and online materials and decreasing person-to-person contact hours. The student is empowered to navigate massive information available online or in the unavoidable and expensive science databases controlled by providers like Elsevier, Clarivate or the Wharton Research Data Services, amongst many others. In addition, the very profession of the scholarly educator is being transformed. S/he is increasingly becoming the skipper of the student's data navigation, and less of an inspirational and aspirational guide into the future. The very act of teaching is being disrupted with already existing experiences of the substitution of teachers by robots. Repetitive and pattern-based instruction, in foreign language

¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/aug/20/graduate-salaries-university-degree-value> (retrieved 01-17-2020)

learning, but also areas in contract law are being actively disrupted by machine learning and A.I. Bot-based language instruction is already a reality at the University of Osaka, in Japan, for instance.

Digital transformation is also forcing changes on the very model of organization. On the one hand, it affords a more efficient and agile operation, but on the other it is unavoidably destroying jobs. Treasury and registrar offices are amongst those particularly endangered jobs at staff level.

2. **Radical professionalization** – The issue is at the heart of most debates around the soul of the university. In Europe, critics of the Bologna Process were vocal about the submission of academic training to the demand side of the knowledge economy, and the debasement of the university to a professional school. The increasing prestige of some professional degrees such as business, Engineering or Medicine further expand the anxiety over linking the wealth of a diverse knowledge ecology to market needs. In fact, the problem is not and can never be the simple idea of professionalization. In a world where traditional jobs are undergoing change it is of the essence of university education to provide adequate skills sets that may promote the employability of graduates. It is wise to remember that professionalization is not a 21st century novelty. The early university model was created by the Church for the professional education of its members and was later expanded to the secular realm.

The very expansion of academic disciplines accompanied the contextual needs of societies. Geography was boosted by the European expansion age to include a wealth of knowledge about the New World, anthropology grew out of the need to classify the diversity of humankind and come to terms with cultural difference; phrenology drew from that same typological drive combined with the medical interest in exploring the brain, and sociology engaged quantitative methodologies to come to terms with prevalent social disfunctions, as Émile Durkheim's early study on suicide (1897) proves. Yet, while some of these disciplines – such as phrenology – subsided, many more have stuck around, despite the radical transformation of the contexts in which they emerged. Often they have not evolved on a pace with social change, failing to convey the skills sets necessary for the new context. What is different nowadays is that due to financial stress and low demand, critical disciplines – Classics is a common example - are being pushed aside by a narrow-minded managerial nexus. Because these 'tulip disciplines' are expensive activities, only large, mostly public universities are increasingly entrusted with their cultivation, forcing a further restriction of the educational model, both by

taking them away from smaller trend focused universities (*università di tendenza*) and by imposing on issues that deal with the moral and cultural dimension of the person a (not so) neutral state-based approach.

3. **Globalization** – Globalization has over the last decades brought on a defining change to the face of higher education. As the demand for higher education grows, so does the global mobility of students, peaking in 2017 to an all-out high of 5.7 Million. This global mobility speaks to the nature of the global market place, which has become an aspirational model for millennial graduates, forcing universities to rethink their model of knowledge production from a regional or mostly national model into ‘educating for the world’. The almost unavoidable pressure to feature in global university league tables, from the Times Higher Education ranking to QS, Shanghai ARWU and similar ventures, reflect in a certain way what economist John Kay calls ‘the modern curse of bogus quantification’ (Kay, 2011:)² while invoking the same sort of institutional and national pride that is prevalent in other social areas, such as sports. This trend is dangerously impacting on the perception of what universities are for as a marketing tool is increasingly becoming a (false) indicator of quality performance.

On a different note, the global also impacts the production of science which is necessarily developed in international and globally connected communities of scholars. As Johann Wolfgang Goethe famously contended in the dialogues with his friend Eckermann, “there is no such thing as patriotic science”. And that is why, the idea of the global from the last century onwards, or of international interactions in earlier centuries, is deeply inscribed not only in the heart but also in the soul of the university. In fact, the modern national university brought about a limitation to the original model of the medieval university, that strong cosmopolitan academy where students from all the walks of Christendom converged. The medieval university was not yet global, but it was international, an eclectic and motley hub of learners and teachers.

The transformations in Higher Education that have occurred in Europe since the Bologna Declaration are revisionist, in a sense. A strong commitment to internationalization buttressed the creation of the European Higher Education Area. The astounding success of mobility programs, such as the Erasmus program, the development towards promotion of international networks and research hubs, the sponsoring of Big Science, such as the International Graphene Project, the Black Hole

²John Kay, *Obliquity: Why Our Goals are Best Achieved Indirectly*, 2011: 71.

photograph and the recent problem-based European University hubs, take us back to the cosmopolitan medieval model, as Umberto Eco insightfully argued. Then again, it is also to the medieval model that we owe the professionalization drive of our Bologna reform.

Beyond the glamour of aspirational mobility, globalization is likely to connote splendor and misery. For one, the splendor of a global community of learners and scholars working for the betterment of society. In the anglophone sector of the world, global diversity is also a financial asset as internationalization is narrowed down to student recruitment. In addition, internationalization is not a naïve endeavor. As with every encounter with cultural difference, conflict lurks at the door. For Catholic institutions, global diversity is both an opportunity to enhance integral development, born out of the ‘awareness of our common origin’ and ‘of a future to be shared by everyone’ (LS, 202), and a challenge to the mission and the identity of the institutions.

4. **Institutional disruption** – Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to higher education is the institutional disruption that arises from a perceived lack of prominence of universities in national strategic planning policies or the attack on expert culture by disruptive entrepreneurs. Likewise, the millennial sharing culture and the buzz of problem centered approaches pivoting around the non-academic crowdsourcing of solutions bring added strain to institutions. A passionate allegiance to disruption is taking consultants by storm: universities need to change in their organization, transform their mode of knowledge production which is to be increasingly technological, virtual, A.I. induced, create stronger ties to businesses and produce innovative solutions that will shorten the time to market, and ultimately disrupt the very idea of a wholesome degree, substituting it for stackable skills based credits. The opening statement of Whole Foods founder John Mackey in the book *Conscious Capitalism* is enlightening in this regard:

Before I cofounded Whole Foods, I attended two universities, where I accumulated about 120 hours of electives, primarily in philosophy, religion, history, world literature, and other humanities. I only took classes I was interested in, and if a class bored me, I quickly dropped it. Needless to say, with such a self-directed educational strategy, I learned many interesting and valuable things, but ended up with no degree. I never took a single business class. I actually think that has worked to my advantage in business over the years. As an entrepreneur, I had nothing to unlearn and new possibilities for innovation. (Mackey, 2013)

Mackey's comments are a fallacy but they seem to ring true to many ears. They reflect the mantra of the 'uneducated' entrepreneur success. The hypervisibility of Harvard's most famous dropout, Bill Gates, or Apple's Steve Jobs expose a trend suggestively unbundling the success of innovation leaders from formal university education. Disruptive entrepreneurs' self-styled presentation as uneducated geniuses add on to what has been diagnosed as the growing political irrelevance of higher education in developed countries. As suggested by Mackey, what is learnt at university is meant to be 'unlearned', if one is to thrive and make a difference as a radical innovator. And yet, though Steve Jobs famously claimed, that dropping out of Reed College was the best thing he could have done, he also stated in his famous Stanford Commencement Address in 2005 that the idea of the different writing fonts on our computer was very much indebted to a single calligraphy course he attended at university.³

Still, for many the traditional university model is arguably 'broken' as Harvard's Clayton Christensen, the self-proclaimed father of disruptive innovation claims, not only due to outdated teaching standards but also owing to a 'strained business model, reflecting demand and pricing pressures previously unheard of in higher education'⁴ A 2014 study for Deloitte by Tiffany Fischmann and Linsey Sledge reports that upon graduation, the new marketplace entrants are 'woefully unprepared'. The authors envisage a world where formal (time-limited, 3 or 4 years) university education is substituted by continuous life-long learning, where the very idea of a structured specialized degree would disappear and be replaced by a task-driven credit accumulation system. This would be a university that it is not valued due to its reputation and tradition, but is rather big-data driven; that does not convey a general one size fits all education, but customized models organized in stackable credit accumulation. The university, then, as learning institution and business would require a major overhaul. Christensen calls on university Presidents to 'Change everything!', if they do not want to have their institutions cast aside as the sorry shard of a once glorious past.

In this apocalyptic scenario, graduates are stranded in the wide ocean of placement as a result of the specialized breaking up of knowledge into small icebergs. This is the culmination of century old models of knowledge production based on strategies of paradigmatic separation

³ "If I had never dropped in on that single calligraphy course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts."^[22] John Naughton (October 8, 2011). "Steve Jobs: Stanford commencement address, June 2005". *The Guardian*. London.

⁴ Clayton Christensen and Michael Horn, "Innovation imperative: Change everything, online education as an agent of transformation," *New York Times*, November 1, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/education/edlife/online-education-as-an-agent-of-transformation.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1400029696-RbeH6uUSQJeVmkH3SHsMow.

and hyper specialization, as Thomas Kuhn wrote in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1955). At a time when societal transformations are increasingly global in scope, complex in nature and solutions draw on collaborative networks, the siloed organization seems to have kept its patina but to have lost its drive. But is it all that bad? Are universities ‘broken’, unable to provide robust answers to the challenges of innovation, to the growing pains arising from the widening of conflict, the worsening of climate change and, despite the retraction of extreme poverty, the widening of the income gap? And for all its ills, would a world without universities be conceivable or desirable?

These four forces are the crux of the 21st century university. And they may threaten to radically change what was the foundational understanding of a university, that is a space where scholars and students seek to freely engage in learning for the advancement of society and our common house. Clearly, the university is a watershed location, a protected space of freedom and responsibility, and an institution that prepares for life, as mentioned in one definition of what a university is and does by British author Stefan Collini:

A university, it may be said, is a protected space in which various forms of useful preparation for life are undertaken in a setting and manner which encourages the students to understand the contingency of any particular packet of knowledge and its interrelations with other, different, forms of knowledge. (Collini, 2012:56)

‘Useful preparation for life’ is certainly an accurate, though still partial definition of what a university is and does and arguably does not account for that other dimension of the value proposition, that seems to have been forgotten in the wider conversation around universities. Stripped from the conversation is the axiological aspect of what education is and does. None of the sophisticated statistics produced by the OECD, UNESCO or the World Bank procure educational externalities around individual contributions to the betterment of the person and the good of society. The value of higher education, then, is drawn to become just another layer of the *habitus oeconomicus*.

Narrowing the value of an education to the useful/useless debate has been nothing but unproductive. In the late 1800’s when the new universities of Liverpool and Birmingham were founded with the mission to provide a more pragmatic education to the youth, a pamphlet in Oxford joked about the debasement that such a model would bring about: “He gets degrees in making jam/ At Liverpool and Birmingham,” looking down on graduates in outlandish areas such as Engineering. Later in the 20th century, Chicago University President Robert Maynard Hutchins wrote in *The University of Utopia* (1953) that the ‘purpose of education is not to produce arms for industry or to teach the youth to earn a living. Its aims are to educate responsible

citizens.” But if without the labor and skillset proposition, beyond the logic of a return on investment, where does the value of university education lie in the 21st century? How can the university maintain its relevance before the demise of the expert culture and before the rowdy iconoclasm of the data driven knowledge society? And in this conundrum, what is the value of Catholic higher education?

I’ll venture a proposition: the unique singularity of our mission is to create **value with values**. And to start, it would be useful to look at what the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Newcastle, Chris Brink, calls ‘the soul of the university’ (Brink, 2018:xv), pivoting around two main questions that basically define every academic endeavor: What are we good at? And what are we good for? These questions are at the heart of our identity, our mission and our activity as Catholic universities. They connote the ancestral quest for truth and goodness. What we are good at is to look relentlessly for truth through research and teaching and in a daily encounter with our constituencies: students, faculty, staff and our third mission partners. What we are good for is to contribute to the good of society, striving for a deeper dialogue to drive dignified living, in the service of our common house, improving ‘the relief of Man’s estate’, as stated by Francis Bacon in the 17th century. But also to understand that our mission is axiologically driven, that our reasoning is enriched by faith just as faith is widened by reason (*Fides quarens intellectum*). And just as Jesus explained to the Doctor of the Law in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the openness to diversity, to Otherness is to be embraced and will only enrich our mission enhancing our relevance to address the uncertain complexity of our world, because “Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.” (EG 246).

II –Value with values: Catholic higher education

Just as in the crowded field of university crisis discourse, both the self-appraisal and the external depiction of what a Catholic university is good for and what it is good at continues to have an ability to raise the most eye-glazing truisms. The jeremiad that substantiates crisis talks on higher education rises to a heightened level in discussions around the mission, the value, the role of Catholic universities. Diversity is here the rule in organizational terms – from small community colleges in Cambodja (Saint Paul’s) to multiversities such as the University of Notre Dame or ACU; from pontifical to Diocesan and congregational universities – but also reflecting the variety of the student constituency, the regional, national or global focus of the activities, the business model (from some sort of public funding in most European Catholic

universities to strictly private models) and also the variety of approaches used to impart the Catholic intellectual tradition. What is striking though is the fact that a large part of the literature, particularly in the English-speaking world, where the idea of Catholic higher education is partisan to an ongoing cultural war, is obsessively focused on the crisis of Catholic higher education. Some striking examples are the overarching *Catholic Higher Education. A Culture in Crisis* (Melanie Morley and John J. Pideri, S.J. 2006), but also *Battling for the Heart and Soul of a Catholic University* (Wilson Miscamble C.S.C., 2013).⁵ Many more draw on the idea of 'revisiting mission' (Wilcox, Lindholm, 2013); 'negotiating identity' (Gallin, 2001), 'renewal' (Gerlach, 2017), of being 'at the crossroads' (O'Brien, 1995). A sober discussion is the one put forth in Giuseppe dalla Torre, *Università non statali e università di tendenza nell'ordinamento italiano* (2001), or the volume edited by A. Chizzoniti, *Organizzazioni di tendenza e formazione universitaria* (2006). In a nutshell, in the diversity of models and approaches, the promise and project of Catholic higher education struggles to find its specific value proposition in the widely populated field of global higher education. This is not simply because in the secularized realm of science, faith based institutions may be regarded as less competitive, set aside from the cutting edge developments of science by moral limitations or as soft institutions organized around the bulk of the sacred sciences and the humanities.

Should the argument be taken to its limits, there would one meet the spirit of Bernard Shaw in his famous debate with John Henry Cardinal Newman over the idea of a Catholic university which the former viewed as a contradiction in terms. In fact, the counter argument may be made, to honor its origin as the haven for the free and universal inspection of knowledge, the university must be Catholic or it is not. In fact, in *The Idea of a University* (1858) Cardinal Newman presents to the Catholics of Dublin the model of the Catholic university as a liberal institution, a free space of instruction for Catholics and non-Catholics alike deemed to cultivate knowledge for its own end, but not as a haven of acritical emulation. He champions the idea of the university as a community of thinkers, ultimately forming individuals that through a broad, transversal, liberal education would be able "to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze". He speaks against the narrow specialization and stipulates that students should be taught on a wider, broader dimension without forfeiting that its larger *telos* is to serve society:

⁵ Other critical examples are Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity. Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995); William Shea, *Trying Times: Essays on Catholic Higher Education in the 20th Century* (2000),

A University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. (Newman, 97)

The Catholicity of the institution plays out in broadening the view of society, raising its intellectual tone, providing true principles to the exercise of public life without forgetting the ‘enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age’, that is, instructing students educated by principles and values arising from the broad inspection of various disciplines to engage with the ideas of the age, and solve its problems and trials, creating value with values.

How should a Catholic university position itself before what lies ahead? Let me preface the next remarks by invoking the International Federation of Catholic Universities ‘Land O’Lakes Declaration’ (1967), which substantiated a vision for the work of Catholic universities, and was drafted under the direction of IFCU’s President, Fr. Ted Hesburgh. In the controversial late sixties the statement spoke to a different watershed moment, inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The group of Catholic American university presidents who gathered in Land O’Lakes sought to render their institutions effective intellectual leaders supporting the development of a dignified world in accordance with Christian values, agreeing on a statement that stressed the inevitable path for all Catholic universities to cultivate a mission set primarily on the pursuit academic excellence and intellectual rigor.

The Catholic university today must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence. To perform its teaching and research function effectively the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom (...).

To this day, many of the critics of this Declaration see this opening statement as a naïve departure from the grounded principles of Catholic identity. The fact of the matter is that research excellence, autonomy and Catholic identity are not, can never be, opposites. The Declaration further argues that in the guarantee of research excellence Catholicism “is perceptibly present and effectively operative.” As Fr. John Jenkins, the President of Notre Dame University in the United States recalls, they “sought to make their institutions places where ideas could be exchanged, defended and criticized openly and free from external intrusion,” and, he adds, “for Catholicism to be present in an academic community, it must first of all

inform the intellectual life of the community of scholars” and this presence cannot do away with free reasoning and inspection.

In 2020, the landscape of higher education is changing fast and irrevocably. Challenges range from the role of the university in the knowledge society (What is the university for?), its relevance to respond to the overwhelming challenges faced by contemporary societies (Why is it relevant? Should it continue to be supported by governments and society at large?), the organizational model it pursues (How should the university of the future be organized?). With a different wording, perhaps, these are precisely the challenges addressed by Pope Francis in the Proemium to the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* for ecclesiastical universities, and clearly binding them with the wider situation facing research and education in our times.

Despite the points of tension, the queries and questionings, which are in fact part and parcel of the nature of an institution that will always be in the making, the epistemological, axiological and economic value of Catholic universities is an unquestionable testimony to the freedom of the Church’s encounter with society. Their quality and global breadth are evidence of their ability to attract top talent and be competitive in their projects and in the educational legacy they afford. More than for public institutions, working for impact is not a simply trend to integrate ESG compliant models, our social, environmental, cultural and economic value is led by the mission to ‘go forth and do good’ effectively improving life in the communities served by the universities. In the global ranking leagues such as the Times Higher Education there are 12 Catholic or Catholic inspired institutions placed in the ranking’s 1st quartile. The International Federation of Catholic Universities is keenly aware that if the specific value proposition of Catholic universities articulating the **distinguishability** of a specific Christian humanist approach to the realities of life, society, science and culture, on the one hand, and the acknowledged **inheritability** of the Catholic intellectual tradition, on the other, is to thrive, institutions must build new cooperative coalitions. Stronger institutions, more qualified in the training of their resources, truly connected with the realities of the cultures in which they are embedded and collaborative in engaging the difference of their community members, are liable to uphold a better service to society and to the Church. Only by developing “concrete and viable solutions”, as Pope Francis inspires us to do, may universities working with the communities where they are embedded, develop in the future generation of students the capacity to aspire, that is quintessential for the budding of talent. The specific value proposition of Catholic universities flourishes not by paying lip service to a sort of reified identity, but by the repeated practice of quality in everything we do: teaching, research and knowledge transfer.

The Federation has just created the Newman Social Responsibility University Framework a tool for Catholic Universities to improve their social impact; it is developing the Knowledge for Africa Initiative to seek out ways to empower the work of our members in Africa; it continues the work of the Refugee Lab for the support of scholars and students in fragile situations and it has set up a new Task Force for Women Leaders at Catholic Universities. And our members are working in tangible and concrete terms, some examples are PUC – Rio de Janeiro’s transdisciplinary environmental hub (NIME), that has completely transformed the university’s carbon footprint; the superb medical research at Università Sacro Cuore in Rome, or the community medicine hub at Boston College, and not least the mind controlled exoskeleton device developed by the Catholic University of Portugal’s Biomedical research hub to help paralyzed individuals.

I finish with a metaphor for our particular value proposition. At Catholic universities our distinguishing feature is not the **factory** but the **studio**. From the Latin, *studium*, the studio connotes practice and inner inspection. It is in the studio that novelty emerges, but it is a novelty labored and reflected upon. The studio is also an experimental and experiencing space, where the artistic gesture is exercised, repeated, erased, redrafted, wiped out, destroyed and restarted until the artist is satisfied with the composition. This is arguably a good description of what Catholic universities do.