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Higher Education for the Future: Accelerating and Strengthening Innovation

Countering post-truth and post-trust attitudes through online and offline pedagogy

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Introduction

This is a short summary of a paper that will be published in the conference proceedings.

I am sorry that my co-author, my ex-UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, cannot be here to share the presentation but I am delighted to be back at the Open University, where I spent eleven very happy years as vice-chancellor.

Ours is called a post-truth, a post-trust and a post-factual era. Each of these adjectives opposes the core values of higher education, such as objective knowledge, academic openness and international collaboration. Surges of nationalism, nativism and populism aim to make our societies more closed.

A striking example was the legislation passed in Hungary in April, 2017 threatening the Central European University's right to operate. The CEU was set up expressly as an 'island of liberal thought' to teach 'the values of open society: free minds, free politics, free institutions' in former communist states. This and similar events, such as attempts to shut down the European University St Petersburg, deny higher education's historic commitment to global openness and rigorous knowledge as the basis for human progress.

Such political attitudes discount the importance of experts, elites and internationalism. They are particularly challenging to higher education institutions (HEIs) in today's digital world because the Internet and social media make untruths and 'alternative facts' as readily available as verifiable knowledge.

We begin by examining the trends that have brought us to this 'post-truth' and 'post-trust' era, noting the impact of populism of both left and right. As a result, the old left-right political spectrum is no longer as salient as continua ranging between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive.

Whatever the obscurantist pressures, humankind will depend more than ever on universities for its healthy development into the 21st century. The inclusion of higher education in the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals expresses a global consensus on its importance.

But how should higher education respond to this new context? We argue, with Rector Ottersen of Oslo, that it calls for less emphasis on didactic teaching and more on debate, both online and face to face.

In a brief final section, we argue that educational technology can play an important role in furthering these aims. In particular, the trend towards openness can be a powerful force for nourishing diversity and countering trends to close down debate. Moreover, while the impact

of social media can sometimes be baleful, they may be turned to advantage if students use them to understand and assess divergent points of view on diverse issues.

The Post-truth and Post-Trust Era: Populism

We look first at the post-truth and post-trust era. Each year the Oxford dictionaries choose a 'word of the year'. For 2016 that word was 'post-truth'. They define post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

Loss of trust in institutions is another feature of our times. This can be a gradual process. Over 50 years Americans' trust in government has declined from 80% to 20%. Trust in government is one of many measures that the Economist Intelligence Unit conflates to produce its annual democracy index. In 2016, for the first time, the US no longer ranked among the world's 19 'full democracies', but has been demoted to 'flawed democracy'. This was before the election of President Trump.

In 'Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order', Francis Fukuyama (1995) demonstrated persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly to the trust that their people have in each other and in their institutions. Some countries flourish because strangers learned to trust one another when signing contracts, allowing them to do deals outside the circles of family, tribal or in-group kinship relied upon in low-trust societies.

Populism is the political expression of these trends away from truth and trust. It combines nostalgia for the past, post-truth rhetoric, lack of trust in experts and institutions, a desire to divide and, above all, hostility to whatever can be labelled elite, usually by an accuser from another elite. Populism can develop on either side of the conventional left/right political spectrum. Its common factor is an attempt to mobilise ordinary people against elites that are perceived to be self-serving. Right-wing populism also accuses these elites of coddling a third group, usually immigrants and other minorities.

You can allocate today's populist parties to these categories for yourselves.

Events in Hungary were an alarming example of the threat that populist politics poses to HEIs. On April 4, 2017 the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, pushed a bill through parliament aimed at closing the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, a graduate university with an international mission and staff and students from over 100 countries. Transforming it into a Hungarian institution with a different name would, in Orban's view, eliminate nefarious influences from abroad. Academics around the world have reacted angrily to this blatant attack on academic freedom and internationalism. The European Union has weighed in and the CEU's Rector, Michael Ignatieff, has pledged to keep the university and its values alive at all costs. It will remain in Budapest at least for the 2017-18 year and negotiations on its longer-term future are ongoing.

There are other symptoms of the threats posed to truth and trust when politicians try to close their societies. 'Expert' was used as a pejorative term in the 2016 referendum and election contests in the UK and the USA. British Leave-the-EU campaigners told people to disbelieve

expert projections about the impact of Brexit, whether from economists, newspaper columnists or diplomats.

Sir Ivan Rogers, the UK's representative to the EU, probably had more expert knowledge about EU-UK relations than anyone. When he resigned after the referendum his farewell letter to staff included this sentence. "I hope you will continue to challenge ill-founded arguments and muddled thinking and that you will never be afraid to speak the truth to those in power." That's a pretty good motto for universities in the post-truth era. The business of higher education is to produce experts in all fields of human endeavour. We must teach them use their expertise confidently, fearlessly and persuasively.

A less obvious symptom of post-truth and post-trust thinking is loss of belief in progress. Higher education is grounded in a belief that change is welcome because, on the whole, it can be for the better. The students in our HEIs believe that, by pursuing truth, they will operate from a higher base of knowledge and skill than we did, whether in dentistry, ecology, history or philosophy. They expect that their more advanced knowledge and skills will create a better world.

Although they do not always call them 'the good old days', many contemporary politicians hark back to a time when things were supposedly better. Wisely, they don't usually specify when that time was, because surveys show that most people think the world was at its best when they were in their twenties. Dating the good old days is subjective. Nevertheless, nostalgia has resurfaced in a big way. People and movements are reaching back to an illusory past and trying to chart the future through a form of retreat.

There are two antidotes to this: facts and knowledge. 'Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory', so higher education must be a good memory for humanity.

In a recent summary, Swedish historian Johan Norberg documents the enormous progress humankind has achieved, not just over previous centuries but also over the decades since the badly remembered 'good old days'. His book, 'Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future', is a powerful antidote to the temptation to generalise from the latest news report about a famine, a war or the health challenges of modern life and conclude how awful things are today. Arguing that 'the Good Old Days are now', Norberg documents persistent long-term trends for the better in vital areas of life all over the world.

How should Higher Education respond?

Humankind will depend crucially on universities as it develops into the 21st century. Whereas the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 were limited to basic education, the Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030 now puts higher education within Goal 4, expressed as: "by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education".

As regards what HEIs teach, degrees are a useful foundation, providing evidence that a graduate has learned to think and master a corpus of knowledge, but today's hybrid jobs require extra skills. People must learn to dissect post-truth discourse and post-trust attitudes. They should cultivate an attitude of systematic scepticism and they must position themselves

on the continua between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive that are successors to the older left/right political distinctions.

In the 2016 political campaigns pollsters noted, in both the UK and the US, that university graduates were much less likely than those without degrees to support populist positions. This suggests that higher education, in and of itself, acts as an antidote to post-truth and post-trust thinking. However, HEIs should offer greater diversity in what they teach and how they enable people to learn. The British Council showed, in its report, 'Culture at Work', that the abilities to demonstrate respect for others and to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints – as well as knowledge of a foreign language – are prized in the workplace. The report urges that HEIs should do more to develop intercultural fluency by teaching communications skills, giving students opportunities to gain international experience and developing international research partnerships.

While there are noble reasons why young people should not adopt populist and isolationist behaviour, a very pragmatic disincentive is that such behaviour diminishes employment prospects!

The art of opening and changing minds was articulated by the philosopher Blaise Pascal over 300 years ago, when he observed that: 'people are generally better persuaded by the reasons they have themselves discovered than by those which come into the mind of others'.

Pascal's proposal for how to do this is worth quoting:

'When we wish to correct with advantage, and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true; and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that he only failed to see all sides. Now, no one is offended at not seeing everything...'

In sum, HEIs should be more explicit in challenging their students to position themselves along the continua of open/closed and inclusive/exclusive and to understand the positions taken by others. We should not tell students where to position themselves but create arenas for debate where they must address this issue personally, possibly arguing for different positions, whether they agree with them or not, rather as students do in Model United Nations simulations.

Whatever the positions that individual students take, universities as institutions must stand for openness. Their motto could be the 50-year old slogan of our host, The Open University: 'open to people; open to places; open to methods; open to ideas'. The challenge is to maintain openness in the post-truth era when politics can have such a negative influence on higher education policies and practice, as we can see in states like Hungary and Turkey.

How can Technology help?

Finally, and briefly, how can technology help us meet these challenges? The members of EADTU are the most expert universities in the world at using technology to develop new pedagogies at scale, so I will merely give some pointers. Our host institution, the UKOU, has done some wonderful work in using the Internet to bring students together in collaborative projects, so there is plenty of experience on which to build.

The combination of online technology with the philosophy of openness, as exemplified in open educational resources, is of special relevance. Moreover, the explosion of MOOCs has inspired much work on the use of social media for learning in the spirit that we have been discussing. I confess that I am a MOOCs junkie and have taken 20 MOOCs from FutureLearn over recent years. FutureLearn calls itself ‘a social learning environment at its heart’. Social media can be a rich resource for following Pascal’s advice and finding out how people with other opinions see a question. In one of my most recent courses, *Taoism and Western Culture*, I felt that I learned more by interacting with other learners online than I would have done in a classroom course.

Finally, MOOCs, and distance learning courses more generally, are usually developed by teams of academics and professionals. This teamwork tends to ensure that issues are presented in a balanced way from a variety of perspectives and also filters out ‘alternative facts’. I was very proud when a graduating student said to me at a degree ceremony: ‘after studying with the Open University I can’t see fewer than six sides to any question!’