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## The Definition of a University\*

The world is unusually full of doubts and confusion, and among them is a very considerable confusion about the nature of a university and the character of a university education. Perhaps this confusion is greatest in those parts of the world where, because universities are an old-established feature of the landscape, they have, until recently, been accepted without very much reflection. Moreover, universities have always been manifold and somewhat ambiguous institutions which naturally resist attempts to define their character. But the creation of many new universities, the appearance of students in large numbers who come with mixed and uncertain expectations, as well as other changes, have shaken us out of the mood of acceptance into a mood of reflection. All over the world universities have now got used to hearing themselves talked about in general terms.

I do not think this is a supremely desirable situation to be in. I would, myself, much prefer to be a member of a confident going concern, not eaten up with doubts about what it is doing or with guilt for not having done it better in the past, and thus able to bend myself to a task which has not degenerated into being itself problematic. But one must take one's time as one finds it, and do one's best to participate in its own peculiar urgencies.

Nevertheless, I feel I ought to ask your forgiveness for reverting to a now rather hackneyed theme. I do so, however, not to sow further doubts, but to try to resolve some which already assail us. In short, I speak as a believer, not (in this matter) as a critical sceptic.

I will make my beginning with a university as a place of learning and teaching.

Learning is the comprehensive activity in which we come to know ourselves and the world around us. It is a paradoxical activity: it is doing and submitting at the same time. And its achievements range from merely being aware to what may be called understanding and being able to explain.

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In each of us it begins at birth; and it takes place, not in some ideal abstract world, but in the local world we inhabit. For the individual it terminates only in death; for a civilization it can end only with the collapse of a characteristic manner of life which may deprive us, for the time being, of anything very much to be learned. Sometimes the process of learning is suspended while we use or enjoy what we have learned. But the suspension is, perhaps, never either decisive or complete: there is probably a component of 'learning,' and not merely 'having learned,' in every notable performance.

By learning I mean an activity possible only to an intelligence capable of choice and self-direction in relation to its own impulses and to the world around it. These, of course, are pre-eminently human characteristics; and, as I understand it, only human beings are capable of learning.

A learner is not the passive recipient of impressions, or one whose accomplishments spring from mere reactions to circumstances; nor is he one who attempts nothing he does not know how to achieve. He is a creature of wants rather than needs, of recollection as well as memory; and he wants to know what to think and what to believe as well as merely what to do. Learning is conduct, not behaviour. In short, these analogies of clay and wax, of receptacles to be filled and empty rooms to be furnished have nothing to do with learners and learning. And the only way decisively to abolish man is to understand him to be incapable of learning by understanding him as a creature capable only of conditionable reflexes for whose behaviour the now modish word 'syndrome' is appropriate.

What distinguishes human beings is not their unusually long period of helplessness and dependence, nor is it (as Aristotle thought) their ability to speak to one another and to engage in rational discourse: these are merely symptoms of human character. What distinguishes them is that each is born an heir to an inheritance to which he can succeed only in a process of learning.

If this inheritance were a landed estate, the heir would expect to succeed automatically on the death of his father or on coming of age. It would be conveyed to him by lawyers, and the most that would be expected of him would be legal acknowledgement.

But the inheritance I speak of is not like this. What every man is born an heir to is an inheritance of human achievements; an inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organizations, religions, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artifacts and utensils.

The components of this inheritance are beliefs, not physical objects; facts not 'things'; 'expressions' which have meanings or uses which

require to be understood because they are the 'expressions' of human minds. The starry heavens above and the moral law within, no less than Dante's *Divina Commedia* and the city of London, are human achievements.

Now, this world of human achievement can be entered, possessed and enjoyed only in a process of learning. A 'picture' may be purchased, but one cannot merely purchase an understanding of it. And I have called this world 'our common human inheritance' because to enter it is the only way of becoming a human being, and to inhabit it is to be a human being. It is into this world that the child, even in its earliest adventures in awareness, initiates itself. Not only may it be entered only by learning, but there is, in fact, nothing else to learn. If, from one point of view, the analogies of wax and clay are inappropriate to learning, from another point of view the analogies of sagacious apes and accomplished horses are no more appropriate. These admirable creatures have no such inheritance; they may only be trained to react to a stimulus and to perform tricks.

But this inheritance is an historic achievement; it is 'positive' and not 'necessary'; it is contingent upon circumstances, it is miscellaneous and incoherent; it is what human beings have achieved, not by the impulsion of a final cause, but by exploiting the opportunities of fortune and by means of their own efforts. It comprises the standards of conduct to which from time to time they have given their preferences, the pro- and con- feelings to which they have given their approval or disapproval, the intellectual enterprises they have happened upon and pursued, the duties they have imposed upon themselves, the activities they have delighted in, the hopes they have entertained and the disappointments they have suffered. The notions of 'finished' and 'unfinished' are equally inapplicable to it. It does not deliver to us a clear and unambiguous message; it offers advice and suggestion, recommendations, aids to reflection, rather than directives. It has been put together, not by designers, but by men who knew only dimly what they did. It is not like a packet of seeds which, implanted in the mind of a learner, *must* blossom well or ill according to their own inevitable character; it is a packet of thoughts, without any fixed potentiality, ready to become whatever the learner can make of them.

And this, perhaps, points the way out of what has become the most famous dilemma of all who think about learning and education. Is learning to be understood as acquiring knowledge, or is it to be regarded as a process in which the learner makes the most of himself?

Learning to the student of to-day, highly conscious that he is something on his own account and not particularly humble in his attachment to 'self-expression,' seems often a kind of imprisonment; what he seeks is emancipation from what he thinks of as the dead hand of the past.

But, in fact, this discrepancy between entering into and possessing a human inheritance and making the most of himself is an illusion.

'Self-realization' for human beings is not, of course, the realization of an exactly predetermined end which requires only favourable circumstances in order that it shall be achieved. But neither is this self an infinite, unknown potentiality which an inheritance of human achievement is as likely to thwart as to promote. Selves are not rational abstractions, they are historic, circumstantial personalities; indeed, they are themselves among the components of this world of human achievements. And there is no other way for a human being to make the most of himself than by learning to recognize himself in the mirror of this inheritance of human achievement.

To learn is not to be put in touch with what is dead, nor is it to be obliged to rehearse the social history of mankind. Death is a feature of the natural, not the human world; and it is only in nature that generation involves a boring process of recapitulating all the earlier stages of life. To inherit this world of human achievement is often to possess oneself of what does not lie on the surface of the present world, of much that has come to be neglected, and of something, even, that for the time being is forgotten. And to know only what is in current use is to become acquainted with only an attenuated version of this inheritance. To see oneself reflected in the mirror of the current modish world is to see a sadly distorted image of a human being; for there is nothing to encourage us to believe that what has captured current fancy is the most valuable part of our inheritance, or that what is better survives more readily than what is worse. And nothing of this human inheritance survives which is not cared for by human beings.

This, then, is learning and the general character of what there is to be learned. I will come back to it later to consider what part a university has to play in it. Meanwhile, let us for a moment consider the activity of teaching, for that too is something that belongs to a university.

Teaching is a practical activity in which a person already learned imparts his learning to his pupils. No doubt one may properly be said to learn from books, from gazing at the sky or listening to the waves (so long as one's disposition is that mixture of activity and submission we call curiosity), but to say that the book, the sky or the sea has 'taught' us anything, or that we have taught ourselves, is to speak the language of unfortunate metaphor. The counterpart of the teacher is not the learner in general, but the pupil. This does not mean that I subscribe to the prejudice which attributes all learning to teaching — especially in a university, where to be a pupil and to be taught is not at all the only path to learning. It means only that the office of teacher is one that bears consideration on its own account.

The activity of a teacher is, then, specified in the first place by the character of his partner. The ruler is partnered by the citizen, the physician by his patient, the master by his servant, the commander by his subordinates, the lawyer by his client, the prophet by his disciple,

the clown by his audience, the hypnotist by his subject, and both the trainer and the tamer by creatures whose aptitudes are for being trained and tamed. Each of these is engaged in practical activity, but it is not teaching; each has a partner, but it is not a pupil. Like the ruler, or the hypnotist, the teacher communicates something to his partner; his peculiarity is that what he communicates is appropriate to a partner who is a pupil — it is something that can be received only by learning.

It is difficult to think of any circumstances where learning may be said to be impossible. Of course, in some conditions it will take place more rapidly and more successfully than in others; but in principle, it does not depend upon any specifiable degree of attention, and it is not uncommon to find oneself to have learned without knowing how or when it happened. Thus, the random utterances of anyone, however foolish or ignorant, may serve to enlighten a learner, who receives from them as much or as little as he happens to be ready to receive, and receives often what the speaker himself did not know or did not know he was conveying.

But such casual utterances are not teaching; and he who scatters them is not, properly speaking, a teacher. Teaching is the deliberate and intentional initiation of a pupil into the world of human achievement, or into some part of it. The teacher is one whose utterances (or silences) are designed to promote this initiation in respect of a pupil — that is, in respect of a learner whom he recognizes to be ready to receive what he has resolved in communicate. In short, a pupil is a learner known to a teacher, a learner for whom he has taken specific responsibility; and teaching, properly speaking, is impossible in his absence.

The part of the teacher, then, is to hold up the mirror of human achievement before a pupil; and to hold it in such a manner that it reflects not merely what has caught the fancy of a current generation, but so that it reflects something which approximates more closely to the whole of that inheritance. His business (indeed, this may be said to be his peculiar quality as an agent of civilization) is to release his pupils from servitude to the current dominant feelings, emotions, images, ideas, beliefs and even skills, and to bring to their notice what the current world may have neglected or forgotten.

Nevertheless, engaged in initiating his pupils into so contingent an inheritance, the teacher may be excused for thinking that he needs some assurance of its worth. For, like others, he may have a superstitious prejudice against the human race and be satisfied only when he can feel himself anchored to something for which fallible human beings are not responsible. But he must be urged to have the courage of his human circumstances. This man-made inheritance, of which he is the living custodian, contains everything to which value is attributable; it is the ground and context of every judgment of better or worse. If there were a mirror of perfection which he could hold up to his pupils, he might be expected to prefer it to this home-made article. But there

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learning one of these skills which keep a current society going is acquiring a specific body of information, and being able to use it with ease and assurance. This body of information is strictly limited (though it may in some cases be large), and it does not significantly look outside itself. It is naturally concerned with the latest achievements of human thought in relation to a particular skill. And thirdly, learning one of these skills is learning *how* to do something which is needed to keep a current society going: the achievements of this learning are all exhibited in the practice of this skill.

Thus, when a civilization is recognized as a collection of skills, each representing a human achievement, which make possible and sustain a current manner of living, learning may be recognized as a man fitting himself to fill a specific place in his society and to satisfy a current demand. Nobody learns skills which are never practised.

Now, to regard our inheritance of human achievements as a collection of skills to be learned, and of inventions, devices and enterprises in which we have learned to impress ourselves upon the world, exploit its natural resources, and to make it the sort of place we want to live in, is one way of looking at it; but it is not the only way. Those who hand on these skills from generation to generation, each adding its own improvements, are certainly agents of civilization; but this is not all there is to be handed on. And, in my view, a university, and learning in a university, represents a different and complementary way of regarding this inheritance. For this inheritance of human achievement, which we can succeed to only in a process of learning, and in relation to which we become and are human beings, contains something else; namely, the various enterprises of understanding and explaining ourselves and the world we find ourselves in. And these are what I think a university is concerned with.

This, you may think, is a distinction without a difference. "Surely," you may say, "these practical skills entail an understanding both of ourselves and the components of the world we live in. And surely there is a lot which goes on in universities, and has always gone on in universities, which is indistinguishable from teaching and learning the skills which sustain a manner of living. Perhaps universities have been more concerned with those skills which have a large intellectual component; nevertheless, these are among the most important of the practical skills which we use in impressing ourselves on the world." Yes. There is truth in both these observations, but they lie to one side of what I am suggesting.

Learning a practical skill is acquiring appropriate information and knowing how to use it to achieve desired results. What is to be learned appears as reliable conclusions reached, facts established and useable. No doubt much of this information is to be recognized as the product of enterprises designed to enlarge our understanding of ourselves and the world. But, properly speaking, it is a by-product. For there is

an important difference between learning which is concerned with the degree of understanding necessary to practise a skill and learning which is expressly focussed upon an enterprise of understanding and explaining. In the one case, what is to be learned appears as a result detached from the process in which it was acquired; but in the other case, what is to be learned is how to participate in an enterprise of understanding which may or may not yield detachable results.

A 'science,' for example, for the learner of a practical skill, is a collection of information capable of being used; but a 'science' in a university is an intellectual pursuit, an explanatory manner of thinking and speaking, being explored. From time to time, no doubt, it may throw off these useable pieces of information; but to do so is not its business. Doctrines, ideas, facts and theories which are invested elsewhere to yield practical profits (like the Mendelian theory of biological inheritance or the molecular structure of matter), in a university are recognized as temporary achievements, valued solely for their explanatory value, in an enterprise of understanding which is, in principle, both endless and autonomous. A 'science' in a university does not have even the appearance of being a warehouse in which items of information are stored, ready for use.

Thus, when a student, entering a university, chooses for himself a field of study — chemistry, biology, economics, sociology — which in some cases may look all too like the opportunity of acquiring the knowledge necessary to practise a skill, what he is really doing is choosing to be initiated into one of the great explanatory enterprises which belong to his human inheritance.

Moreover, there are many enterprises of understanding pursued in universities, like history or philosophy, which cannot be expected to throw off any such by-products of readily useable conclusions and which, consequently, may scarcely be mistaken for anything but autonomous enterprises of understanding.

In short, our inheritance of human achievements includes, not only the skills we need for transforming the world, but also (and independently) these great, autonomous, enterprises of understanding ourselves and the world. And, whatever the adventitious appearances to the contrary, it is with these that learning at a university is concerned. It is participation in this which is the common character of all the faculties of a university; it is this common character which makes nonsense of the modish notion of 'two cultures'; and it is this common engagement in understanding which gives to the activity of teaching in a university its distinctive character. For teaching, here, is not imparting information; it is holding up the mirror of a civilization in such a manner that what is to be seen in it is men thinking, men engaged in the supremely intellectual activity of understanding the world.

Moreover, it is the manner in which teaching is carried on in a university which stands in the way of our mistaking these enterprises of understanding merely for other skills, perhaps less immediately useful than the practical skills, but nevertheless sharing the common characteristics of all skills.

In a university, a 'science' is taught by one who is actually engaged in exploring it, history is taught by historians, philosophy by philosophers. But students who come to study a 'science' or history or philosophy are not regarded as apprentices to a particular explanatory skill. It is possible that some of them will become 'scientists,' or historians, but the vast majority will not. And what a teacher in a university is doing, is not educating successors to himself (though some of his pupils may turn out to be this); it is imparting to his pupils some familiarity with one of these enterprises of understanding as autonomous intellectual pursuits. What he is doing is showing them what it is like to think as a 'scientist' or as an historian.

And, here, perhaps, there is a certain oddity in the situation. For long enough it has been believed that, even for people who are to spend the rest of their lives in practical occupations of one sort or another, it is a good thing for them to spend three or four years, at this time in their lives, not in learning a professional skill, but in becoming acquainted with some of the great enterprises of human understanding and explanation—becoming acquainted, that is, with what may be recognized as the 'academic' attitude towards the world. It has been believed that one who is not himself going to be a 'scientist,' or an historian, or a philosopher is not wasting his time acquiring, not some information (which might always come in useful), but some insight into what it is to be a 'scientist' or an historian. This is the belief which, in a certain sense, constitutes a university as a place of education. And, although I cannot say where it sprang from, I do not think it is either an eccentric belief, or one incapable of being defended.

No literature can consist entirely of masterpieces. The circumstantial context of masterpieces is a vast body of writings of less than this quality, and a public educated by them to recognize and appreciate the masterpiece. And, in somewhat the same manner, the great enterprises of understanding pursued by human beings depend upon the appreciation of men who can recognize them, and even be excited by them, but who do not and cannot actually participate in them. Thus, the university student of 'science,' though he may never himself become a scientist in the strict sense, plays a not unimportant part in making possible the explanatory enterprise we call a 'science.' Indeed, I believe he plays a more important and less equivocal part in this than the man who merely uses, in a practical enterprise of exploitation, the information and ideas which are the usable by-products of scientific thinking.

Moreover, the most important gift of a university to the society in which it has place is not the provision of the useful by-products thrown

off by some enterprises of understanding, but the opportunity it offers, to many or few, of not going through life without having had a glimpse, though perhaps no more than a glimpse, of that part of their human inheritance to which these enterprises belong: the opportunity to possess more completely than falls to the lot of everybody the whole of this inheritance of human endeavour and achievement.

A society aware of its human inheritance, brought up to value it and take pride in it, and recognizing that none of it can be possessed except in a process of learning and that some of it is not to be judged by its immediate usefulness — such a society will be disposed to afford as much as it reasonably can from its resources for its university, and for the sort of education that goes on in universities. Clearly, this will not be the first charge on a pioneer society: the homestead, the school-house, the church and the market-place may be expected to come before the university; and the farmer, the soldier, the man of business, the lawyer, the politician, even the poet and the players of musical instruments, will come before the scholar. But, in our notion of a civilized society, something will be lacking until the university makes its appearance. And when it appears it will be recognized to be an association of persons engaged in caring for and attending to this inheritance of enterprises of understanding. It will be concerned, not merely to keep this intellectual inheritance intact, but to be continuously recovering what has been lost, restoring what has been neglected, collecting together what has been dissipated, repairing what has been corrupted, reconsidering, reshaping and reorganizing these advantages of human understanding.

Its scholars will live at what is called “the frontiers of knowledge”; and they will recognize themselves as engaged in intellectual pursuits rather than as gatherers or custodians of a store of information. And their pupils will be spectators at performances, and will carry away with them (when the time comes to go out into the world) whatever glimpses, impressions or insights they may have acquired of such men at work.

For there is something properly and unavoidably ‘cloistered’ about a university. Its pursuits have only an oblique relationship to the world in which immediate usefulness is the criterion of importance. It is a luxury — not in the sense that what it supplies is superfluous to all but the very sophisticated, but in the sense that this belongs to the world of human wants rather than to the world of human needs.

Not being comparable to a light-industry (having no product, in the strict sense), nor to a store (having no sales-list of items for disposal), a university is apt to confound the accountants. Profit and loss, cost and return on capital are not easily calculable; indeed, there is something inappropriate in making the calculations. It illustrates the truth that there is nothing great in the world that does not involve waste, and that the human propensity to avoid waste (which has itself been erected into a science) is, perhaps, one of our greatest intellectual van-

ities. But to me, at least, the tendency of modern universities to become immensely costly affairs, both relatively and absolutely, is regrettable. If they were poorer they might be better — so long as their poverty was recognized as an opportunity to go more warily in setting-up new (and often not very well-considered) faculties, or for the exclusion of distracting frills.

But universities or proto-universities having appeared — that is, associations of scholars engaged in exploring the great human enterprises of intellectual understanding — their recognition as valuable educational institutions opens up some difficult questions. Who are to enjoy the benefits of an education of this kind?

Clearly, there will be some who, by native ability and by their willingness to submit to the discipline of academic study and by their willingness to endure the detachments and privations it entails, single themselves out as appropriate. These, let me say again, are not confined to those who have discovered in themselves a vocation for scholarship; they will include also others who, though they will never be scholars, are reluctant to pass through life without having become acquainted with some of the great intellectual pursuits of mankind. And, although there may be ways of discovering who these are, and the relation between their abilities and their ambitions, these devices will not be infallible, even if the criterion itself remains uncorrupted.

But, as generation succeeds to generation, and the life of the student — largely on account, not of the academic opportunities a university expressly offers, but because of what it affords as a scene of happenings — begins to acquire an irresistible allure, the claim not to be excluded from it begins to appear as the claim not to be excluded from one of the major pleasures of civilized life.

And when, added to this, having enjoyed the life of a student, and having, perhaps, acquired a university degree, is recognized as conferring a desirable social status and perhaps opening the door, not merely to the 'learned professions,' but to the wonderland of personal fortune, wealth and prosperity, then we have before us a situation recognizably our own.

Let me say something about each of these components of this situation. *What* I recall as the experience of going to a university is the sense of entering upon a life from which, so far as may be, the sordid ambitions and the collective inanities of the world had been magically excluded; the feeling of being emancipated from the pressures of immediate achievement; the offer of an opportunity to look around, without enemies at one's back, and without having to come to immediate decisions; the release from old commitments entered into in the semi-conscious years of childhood, and the absence of haste to contract new ones; the leisure, the sense of adventure and the companionship of others of the same kind; the opportunity to make mistakes without having to

pay heavily for them: and all this, not in a vacuum or in a museum, but surrounded by the inherited learning, literature and experience of our civilization and by men engaged in exploring this inheritance and adding to it; and not as a sole occupation, but combined with the discipline of study. And *when* I recall it, it seems to me so valuable an experience that I would not know how to deny it to anybody. Yet, it was what it was, in virtue of the fact that it corresponded to the wants and expectations of the great majority of my companions; and if we had imposed upon it different wants and different expectations, it would have dissolved, leaving behind only the little which was able to withstand the invasion.

I could not have written off as merely illegitimate the wants and expectations of such invaders. I could not do this even if they were the desire for well-digested useful information to be handed to them on a plate; the desire for the opportunity, not to learn to think, but to shout mindless and barbaric slogans to one another; the desire to win the easy victories which fall to a feeble *libido dominandi* exercised over the diffidence of half-formed and uncertain personalities; or even merely the desire to live at ease and postpone the time when the simple but inexorable demands of adult life have to be responded to. But I cannot avoid the conclusion that a university handed over to the satisfaction of these wants and expectations, or their like, has ceased to be a university; and that this is the main consideration to be taken into the account when we consider the place of university education in a society.

In respect of the other component of our situation — our recognition of a university career as the passport to social prestige, to power and to emolument — there is this to be said. I think we have gone too far in this direction. In exaggerating the esteem which attaches to this qualification we have depressed the esteem which has hitherto attached to many others, and we are prejudicing the appearance of new ways of acquiring esteem. Those who have been to a university have had the opportunity of acquiring some admirable qualities, and many of them have actually acquired them; but we are wrong to confine our admiration to these. There are many others, for which a university is not the natural seed-bed, and these should not be excluded from our esteem. Moreover, if we accord this exclusive esteem to a university education, we shall end by imposing upon universities a distracting and corrupting engagement — that of providing for the education of everybody who, for whatever reason, we are to admit to our esteem. And that way lies ruin.

Those who have passed their lives in universities are not so vain as to have chosen this engagement for themselves; it is something which, in present circumstances, they are liable to have imposed upon them, not merely by designing governments, but also, and more powerfully, by the less detectable pressures of our single-minded modern societies. In a civilization which has sold itself to the plausible ethics of product-

ivity and in doing so has given itself a narrow path upon which to tread, and in societies which have begun to think of themselves, more and more, in the exclusive terms of 'an economy,' it is only to be expected that universities should be pressed into the common pattern, and be made servants of the social purpose. But in these circumstances, they become institutions in need of care and protection; not because what they have to offer is something to be ashamed of, but because it seems to grow daily less relevant to those current wants which have won our exclusive attention. This single-minded endeavour to provide for the needs of a technological society has been seen by some as an opportunity for university education to win the applause of those who have hitherto been doubtful or indifferent. But this is not so; what such an endeavour seeks is only the adventitious by-products of the great enterprises of human understanding and explanation. And universities, the custodians of these enterprises, are, at best, offered a package-deal with regard to the students they take and what they are to be taught, which entails partial surrenders; and, at worst, they find themselves wholly suborned.

'Academic freedom' has become a cant phrase in the mouths of well-meaning but muddled advocates. But, in fact, it can sustain only one meaning: the freedom to be academic, the freedom of a university to pursue its explorations of the enterprises of human understanding and to initiate successive generations of students into this intellectual inheritance. It is false friends, rather than open enemies, we should beware of; those whose friendly gestures and offers of help are all too often incitements to desert. The time may come when, in the face of the vulgarity of a single-minded devotion to the exploitation of the world and of the barbarism of instant affluence, learning will have to hide its head, and universities will survive only by the exercise of the courage of their calling and by becoming retreats devoted to keeping alive, in hostile circumstances, the great disinterested enquiries of mankind. But that time is not yet. Universities still have some genuine and discerning friends, many of whom have themselves never enjoyed the opportunities they offer; and there are students, alive to the enchantment of the pursuit of understanding, and for whom a university education, uncorrupted, and with all its ardours and severities, is an answer to their hopes, desires and expectations. And to these friends, all who love learning and who do not believe that learning is the only thing in life, are humbly grateful.