Houses of Wisdom

*Universities, scholarship and
diversity of perspective*

Sir Michael Barber

The Commemoration Oration
King's College London

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Sir Michael Barber

Sir Michael Barber is one of the leading education and government experts of the last 20 years.

Sir Michael served as Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards from 1997 to 2001 during which time school performance improved significantly.

In 2001 he set up the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in No 10 Downing Street to ensure the successful implementation of the Prime Minister's priorities in domestic policy, including education and health.

Sir Michael is the author of several books, including *How to Run a Government* (Penguin, 2016).

Having worked as Head of McKinsey's Global Education Practice and as Pearson's Chief Education Adviser, Michael now leads his own company, Delivery Associates, and in 2017 was appointed as the first Chair of the Office for Students, England's higher education regulator.

This Commemoration Oration is dedicated to Lord Peter Hennessy, incomparable scholar and advocate of scholarship.

Foreword

By **Professor Sir Edward Byrne AC**
President & Principal, King's College London

Sir Michael Barber has deservedly carved out a reputation as one of the pre-eminent global strategists when it comes to innovative practice and policy-making in areas such as education and health.

When we first approached him to deliver the Commemoration Oration, our intention was for it to be delivered in 2020, marking the 100th anniversary of the first Commemoration Oration by the writer and poet G. K. Chesterson. The Commemoration Oration is intended to celebrate King's role as a seat of learning in the service of society. This theme – the civilising function universities play as houses of wisdom – is explored richly in this long-form pamphlet version of Sir Michael's Commemoration Oration in January 2021.

In 1920, the country was still recovering from the effects of the First World War and seeking to find its way forward in a society where modes of life, political alignment, and social expectations had changed greatly. Universities in the post-war period were also challenged to do more and evolve.

At the beginning of 2020, universities certainly faced pressures and hard questions over their long-term trajectories, but little did we know how much challenge and uncertainty we would have to contend with, just around the corner.

The post-pandemic world we emerge into will be different. In 2021, we find policy-makers casting around looking for solutions to the major challenges we now face as a result of the profound social and economic impacts of the pandemic. Social attitudes towards expertise, particularly in the scientific arena, are also diverging sharply, in light of the impact of science-informed government policy on people's lives.

In this pamphlet, Sir Michael argues that universities, at their best, can play a special and significant role in helping curious minds to reach their full potential and achieve remarkable things in life.

Sir Michael rightly argues that we must rekindle the fire of Robbins' principles on participation. At a time when arguments that 'more means less' in higher education are gaining traction in political circles, universities should indeed redouble their commitment to attracting talented and curious minds from all backgrounds, regardless of familial financial circumstances.

Sir Michael rightly contends that to flourish, our universities need to reaffirm their commitment to an intellectual culture of scholarship that takes academics and students alike into an environment that is at times unfamiliar and uncomfortable, yet empowering.

The challenge in a more pluralistic and connected world, where people more readily wear their values and aversions on their social media accounts, is to foster an environment where the tolerance and spontaneity that underpins the development and transmission of knowledge is sustained rather than constrained.

In this pamphlet, Sir Michael explores the dynamics of freedom of thought and expression, arguing that the substance of these issues transcends the technical debate about statutory responsibilities, touching on the heart of what universities should stand for.

Sir Michael recognises that university leaders, at all levels, have a responsibility to foster a dynamic and open-minded culture of scholarship – avoiding the pitfalls of rigid intellectual orthodoxy, group think, and "won't fit in here" mindsets.

Universities cherish their institutional autonomy, but we are not islanded from society. If universities come to be seen as intellectually intolerant hot houses for mono-perspectives, they will not thrive, nor represent society. Moreover, universities certainly do not have a monopoly on good ideas, reasoned thinking, and high-quality teaching.

Universities should strive to diversify their student and academic communities, but not purely in terms of social background characteristics – we also need to ensure this belief in diversity applies to intellectual perspectives. We must recognise that an intolerance for diversity of perspective is now regularly cited as a concerning issue, by a growing number of colleagues and students, and seek to address this.

In his conclusion to this pamphlet, Sir Michael focuses on the multitude of useful economic and social functions universities play in the lives of both the individual and society.

I also agree with his concluding argument that at root universities should aspire to be houses of wisdom for the development, utilisation, free exchange, and preservation of ideas and useful information. In doing so we can enrich human civilisation in a variety of unplanned, unforeseen, and often delightful ways.

Introduction

Houses of Wisdom. In the 8th century CE, Madinat al-Salam became the wealthiest and largest city in the world. The recently established Abbasid dynasty, which had come to rule the Muslim world, was deeply connected to a global network of trade and ideas; Baghdad, as this city is known today, had been founded to become the thriving economic and intellectual hub of the Abbasid Empire. "The least of the territories ruled by the least of my subjects provides a revenue larger than your whole dominion," one Caliph wrote to the Emperor in Byzantium.[1] Three successive Caliphs – al-Mansur, Harun al-Rashid and his son, al-Mamun – established in this extraordinary new city, an extraordinary new institution, Bayt al-Hikmah, the House of Wisdom.

According to Richard Ovenden, the current head of the Bodleian Library, this House of Wisdom was "a library and an academic institute devoted to translations, research and education, attracting scholars from all over the world, from many cultures and religions."[2] With support from the caliphs, these scholars studied the classical texts of ancient cultures including the Greek, the Hebrew, the Persian and the Hindu, as well as texts from the Muslim world. It was here that Al-Khwārizmī, the great mathematician and astronomer, made huge advances in both arithmetic and algebra by combining Sanskrit, Arabic and Greek thought in new ways. He was able to do so, in spite of an obscure background, because of "the social mobility and intellectual meritocracy that characterised early Abbasid scholarly life in Baghdad."[3]

1   Frankopan, P., 2015. *The Silk Roads: A new history of the world* (Bloomsbury), p.94

2   Ovenden, R., 2020. *Burning the Books: A history of knowledge under attack* (John Murray), p.42

3   Lyons, J., 2010. *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (Bloomsbury), p.71

If there had been a global university ranking at the time, this House of Wisdom would surely have come top. A century later, Al-Yakubi described what Baghdad had become.

> "No one is better educated than their scholars, better informed than their authorities…, more solid in their syntax than their grammarians…more expert than their physicians, more competent than their calligraphers, more clear than their logicians, more zealous than their ascetics, better jurists than their magistrates, more eloquent than their preachers…"[4]

Had he known anything about it, the Venerable Bede writing his *History of the English Church and People* during the previous century, with the wind (and occasionally the Vikings) sweeping in off the North Sea would surely have envied the grandeur of the House of Wisdom. (The relatively primitive nature of English scholarship in the early middle ages is revealed by the fact that the largest monastic collection of books in England, at the time of the Norman Conquest, was at Ely, where there were no more than a few hundred books.)[5]

More than one thousand years after the establishment of Bayt-al-Hikmah, could our contemporary universities emulate this House of Wisdom? Maybe they could even do better (not least by adding the half of humanity, women, who were excluded from all universities back then)?

As my theme this evening, I want to explore the idea that our universities could become 21st century Houses of Wisdom. This is a lecture that began with those three words and will end with those same three words. In the meantime, I want to attempt to answer three questions that need to be
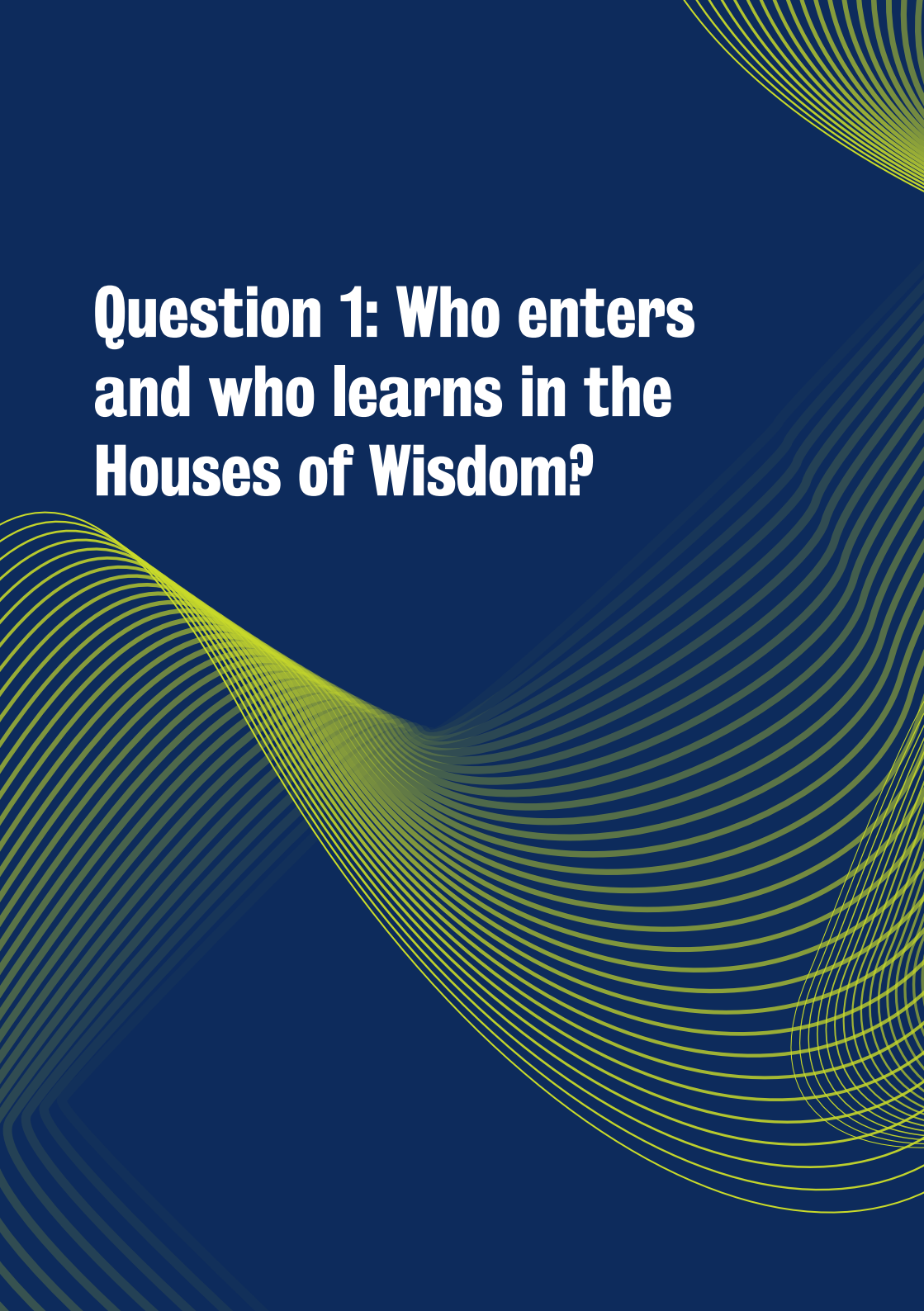
4   Ibid. p.61
5   Ovenden, R., 2020. *Burning the Books: A history of knowledge under attack* (John Murray), p.43

faced if we aspire to create, here in Britain, modern Houses of Wisdom, universities that are the envy of the world.

I am very grateful to King's College for inviting me to give this prestigious Oration and for enabling the event to take place at all, given the restrictions that result from the pandemic. It is an honour and a privilege, and an opportunity to think beyond the constraints of the present. I remain Chair of the Office for Students (OfS) for a few weeks more, but this lecture provides a personal not an official perspective. It is, however, informed by, and draws inspiration from, the many university visits I have been able to make in my current role. In spite of all the challenges, our universities are wonderful places full of people learning, writing, researching and doing remarkable things. This is a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those I have met on my visits.

Question 1: Who enters and who learns in the Houses of Wisdom?

One of the first things I did on being appointed Chair of the OfS was to read the Robbins Report, published in 1963, from cover to cover. It is a remarkable piece of work and nothing comparable from an official source has been published since.

> "Our guiding principle," it asserts, "is that…all young persons qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a full-time course in higher education should have the ability to do so."[6]

This surely remains the right guiding principle though we can now add 'part-time' study of higher education courses as well. The Secretary of State recently said that the 50 percent target was no longer on his agenda. He is right, it is no longer needed. While there is no need for a further target, we should be wary of a limit. The changing nature of the labour market combined with the continuing improvement of our school system, make it highly likely that more school leavers will aspire to higher education in future than have in the past. International comparisons reinforce that view strongly.

This additional demand will be further enhanced if the diversity of routes to a degree continues to grow. For example, there has been impressive and welcome growth in the availability of degree apprenticeships, including in some of our most prestigious research-intensive universities. If the option of assembling a degree over a decade or so, combined with periods of work, takes off, as recommended by Philip Augar, one can see still further demand for higher education being unlocked. And in any case, as this year of the pandemic shows, there is no sign that demand for a higher education is tailing off. On the contrary, it continues to grow.

Those who argue that fifty percent of the cohort going to university is too large a percentage not only ignore what

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6   Robbins, L., 1963. *Higher Education* (Command 2154 HMSO), p.49

is going on around the globe; they also, whether they intend it or not, stand in the way of social mobility. In South Korea, 70 percent of 25-34 year olds hold a tertiary education qualification.[7] In England, 58 percent of 18-30 year olds from the highest participation neighbourhoods attend university; whereas just 28 percent from the lowest participation areas do so.[8] In other words, the argument for a cap on numbers is simply that "while, of course, my children will attend university, other people's children don't need to." This doesn't seem right for Houses of Wisdom.

The lifting of the numbers cap in 2013 not only opened up universities to more students, it also created more opportunities for more students than ever before from low income, and other disadvantaged backgrounds, to seize the opportunity of a higher education. Admissions in 2020, in spite of the pandemic, have further advanced that progress. Combined with Access and Participation Plans, the absence of a student numbers cap is a key ingredient for the revolution in social mobility.

This is not to argue that every young person should go to university. Far from it. There will be students who don't or don't want to, at this point in their lives, meet the Robbins principle. For them, there are, or should be, courses of quality available in further education or apprenticeships that equip them for the labour market of the future and set them on course to learn throughout life. Companies such as Multiverse (until recently known as WhiteHat) are innovating radically in precisely this area by offering a combination of apprenticeships with what they call the "full stack" experience of higher education, all of it online.

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7   OECD, https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm
8   Comparison of POLAR4 quintile 5 with quintile 1, 2018-19: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-participation-between-most-and-least-represented-groups/

In this context, the government's commitment to the enhancement of further education is highly significant. I recently wrote a brief history of the school system in England for the 150th anniversary of universal primary education in England, brought in by Forster's Act in 1870. Reflecting on that entire sweep of educational history, perhaps the most striking failure was the continuous neglect of vocational education, even though the need for it was obvious throughout. This time it can and should be different.

The result would then be that every young person considering their options at ages 15-18, instead of seeing a binary choice between going to university and a range of other less esteemed choices, would see an appealing, worthwhile spectrum of opportunity. The options would range from high-tariff courses at research intensive universities through to well-designed apprenticeships which combine learning with work, each of which has different benefits and each of which is, in any case, not an irreversible choice, but a worthwhile next step in a lifetime of learning.

And who chooses which routes should be determined not by race, creed, gender, family income or location – but by aspiration, ability to benefit and what Martin Luther King called "the content of your character".

The crucial point is this – the choices on the spectrum should be available equitably, regardless of upbringing or family income. The different educational pathways should reflect different routes to fulfilment in life, not means of cascading income differentials through the generations. So, if you care what kind of society we are building and if you think the status quo is unacceptable, it does matter that, regardless of background, anyone can choose from the full spectrum of opportunity. Critics sometimes describe the fairness I am describing as social engineering – perhaps it is, but it is much less so than consciously constructing the future to replicate the past. I don't call it social engineering; I

call it levelling up, which I am glad to see at the heart of the current government's programme.

This agenda matters not just to society but to institutions too. Any true House of Wisdom surely wants the best available talent to join it, not just the sons and daughters of the well-connected. (One of the qualities I most admire in this country – compared to the Ivy League, for example – is that a donation to a university endowment would not buy access to it for your child.)

If our universities are to be Houses of Wisdom, it also matters, of course, what happens when they get there; what curriculum is offered, how it is taught and learnt, the degree of challenge involved, the support available at times of need, the facilities from libraries to learning spaces, the wider student experience and, above all, the progress students are able to make, the degrees they, hopefully, succeed in getting and the opportunities in life and work that success opens up. Many of these features are extraordinarily challenging to deliver in this time of pandemic. I salute all those in universities: students, faculties and administration who are making the most of such difficult circumstances. Detailed planning, creativity and generosity of spirit will get us through.
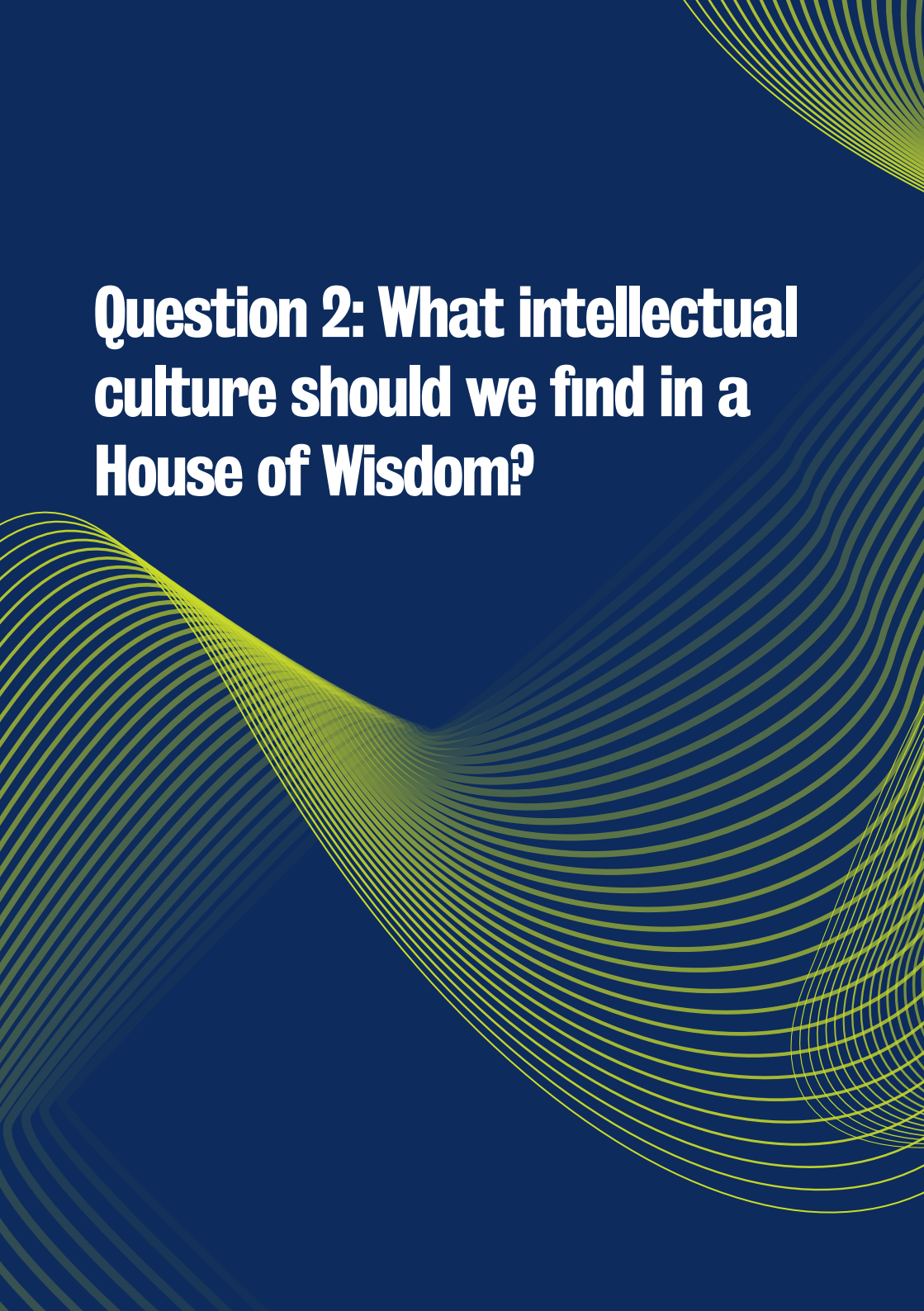
I will come to the intellectual culture in answering my second question but here my point is that the Access and Participation Plans, which all universities registered with OfS have put in place, are central, not just to social mobility, but also to the well-being, resilience and diversity of universities themselves. The shift from annual plans to plans that set ambitions five years ahead, to focusing equally on access and participation, to the inclusion of progression into the labour market, to monitoring progress against trajectories set by the universities themselves and to active sharing of best practices across the sector, has resulted in the active pursuit of an agenda that is potentially transformative.

If institutions achieve the goals they have set themselves, we will see some of the most stubborn access gaps at the most selective universities – long-standing barriers to social mobility in our country – halved within five years and eliminated entirely within twenty years. What a prize that would be! Our most selective universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, are to be saluted for their ambition. Oxford University has committed to ensure that 25% of the British undergraduates it admits come from low-income backgrounds. Wadham College has built an entirely new building to make a reality of its aspirations in this regard – clearly it aspires to be, or to continue to be, a House of Wisdom.

Across our higher education sector, we are seeing examples of universities taking steps to benefit from the most diverse range of talent they can. From universities such as Exeter establishing their own schools, through to extended medical programmes at King's College London, or radical use of contextual admissions at York St John University, I see the evidence of a quiet social mobility revolution.

In short, Access and Participation Plans cannot be dismissed as a regulatory burden; they are a statement of intent, a potentially transformative contribution not just to the higher education system but also to the society of the future.

Question 2: What intellectual culture should we find in a House of Wisdom?
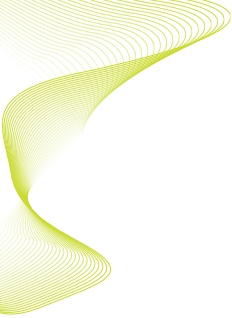
As we saw, the original House of Wisdom attracted scholars from all over the known world. These scholars studied and translated books written in numerous languages and sought to distil wisdom, and create knowledge, from them. The library available to them was the largest and most diverse in the world. Of course, the obvious gender gap went unaddressed – we are still working on that in the 21st century – but we can take the original House of Wisdom as a metaphor for rigour, diversity of perspective, respect for scholarship and not just openness to ideas from elsewhere but an active welcome for them.

This is my starting point for thinking about the intellectual culture in contemporary universities. We can set out the choice universities now face.

Can they create an intellectual culture in the institution that is diverse, challenging, mind-opening, demanding and sometimes destabilising? Is it connected to, engaged with, and contributing to the community and world around it? Does the culture start from, in Matthew Arnold's famous words, "the best which has been thought and said in the world" and cherish it, contest it and build on it? In short, a culture which is intellectually uncomfortable but empowering. The kind of culture that encourages widely divergent views on ethics and the missing shade of blue. Open.

Or is it uniform, manageable, mind-numbing, easy-going and safe? Does it avoid difficult questions? Is it an escape from the community and world around it? In short, a culture which is intellectually comfortable but enfeebling. The kind of culture that is apologetic about David Hume – not because of his philosophy – but because in the 18th Century he didn't match 21st Century ethical standards, what

Thomas Devine, one of Scotland's leading historians, called "the intellectual sin of anachronistic judgement."[9] Closed.

Let's take two examples to illustrate this further; one closed, the other open.

In the late 19th Century, Maxim Gorky, the great Russian author, took a river boat from his poverty-stricken home up the mighty Volga to Kazan. There he took a room with a classic Babushka who soon asked him about his intentions. "To study at the university," he replied.

> "You're very good at peeling potatoes", she responded (while cutting her own finger with a knife), "Do you think that qualifies you for entering the university?"[10]

It turns out it didn't. He was not admitted. No Access and Participation Plan there. As far as the Babushka was concerned, the university might just as well have been on a different planet. It was divorced from the community. Closed. Gorky got an education in Kazan anyway, not from the university, but from "the bewildering variety of people" he went on to meet in the city, including revolutionaries, fanatics, eccentrics and aimless drifters. For Gorky, no doubt, university life would have been much more comfortable but also much less challenging and ultimately life-affirming. With heavy irony, he titled his book *My Universities*, the truly harsh "book of life" had been a much better education than the university could ever have provided.

Or take the second example, Saad Rizvi, a good friend of mine and son of a bureaucrat in Pakistan, who did brilliantly at school in Karachi, and then suddenly found

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9   Devine, T., quoted in The Herald, 'David Hume: Sir Tom Devine slams University of Edinburgh's decision to remove name from building', published 13 September 2020: https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/18717932.david-hume-sir-tom-devine-slams-university-edinburghs-decision/

10   Gorky, M., 1888. *My Universities* (Penguin, trans. 1979), p.15

himself at Yale, outside his own country for the first time, and more importantly outside his own culture, religion and experience. He engaged with the institution and it engaged with him. There was cultural gulf between them, but they built a golden bridge across it. His view of the world was challenged over time. Transformed in time. His Muslim faith remained deep but now it was a faith open to alternatives. A comfortable experience? Certainly not. Empowering? Certainly. Open, certainly.

This is what a university education at its best can do.

There is extensive debate these days about freedom of speech. On the one side, those who argue that more should be done to prevent the "no-platforming" of controversial speakers; on the other those who say this is all much exaggerated and just another front in the culture wars. I side with the former. To me, it seems obvious that speakers such as Jenni Murray or Amber Rudd should be welcome on campuses, regardless of their views. Advocates of differing perspectives on possible futures for Hong Kong, free markets or planned economies, the future of the Middle East, the impact of British Empire on people and history and transgender rights, all these and more, should be welcome, heard and debated.

I am often told that the vast majority of such possibly controversial speaking engagements do in fact go ahead. I am willing to believe that this is the case, but I would love to see the data. It is hardly a job for a regulator but if I were a university administrator or an influence at UUK, I would be collecting the data. Then, when a cancellation happened or a speech was prevented by protest, I would at least be ready to point out – if, in fact, it turned out to be the case – that for every event cancelled in response to protest there had been 250 that went ahead. One speech blocked would still be a stain on freedom of speech, but the context would be clearer.

My critique of the current free speech debate is not that it is too extensive but that it is too limited. After all, the conceptual rule for such events is surely clear; a university should be a place that actively promotes and protects the widest possible freedom of speech within the law. If that is accepted, then invitations to controversial speakers raise merely practical questions – how do you ensure events go ahead in spite of opposition; how do you allow peaceful protest against the event but not the prevention of the event itself?

In any case, events with controversial speakers are, in my view, only one part, albeit symbolically important, of the much wider question I have raised about the intellectual culture of a university. If that culture is right – open and uncomfortable as opposed to closed and comfortable – such events will go ahead. Much more important from this point of view, though, is the intellectual culture in the tutorial, classroom and lecture hall (whether face-to-face or digital). As Ed Byrne and Charles Clarke argue, universities have a duty to "uphold freedom of speech under the law and sustain a … culture that gives priority to a true and rounded intellectual and cultural history that deals with history as it is and not how it might or should have been."[11]

This is not a matter just of principle, it is also a critical and practical aspect of the quality of a student's academic experience. Is that experience challenging, diverse, open, rigorous? Is its foundation what Timothy Garton Ash calls "robust civility"? In a passage less famous than the one I quoted earlier, but no less profound, the Robbins report argues that, over and above preparing students for the future economy, a university should ensure that "what is taught is taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind."[12] Those general powers must surely include the

11 Byrne, E., Clarke, C., 2020. The University Challenge (Harlow), p.239

12 Robbins, L., 1963. *Higher Education* (Command 2154 HMSO), p.6

ability to debate and argue, on the one hand, and to listen, clarify and understand, on the other.

One of my seminal experiences as an undergraduate was choosing, with a friend, to interrupt a lecture (on the standard of living in 19th century Britain) in order to argue with the lecturer, a robust free-marketeer, Max Hartwell. He argued across the lecture hall with us for a few minutes and then said, given the large audience present, he wanted to finish his lecture but that he would welcome us to his study in the near future to continue the argument. We took him up on his offer and, though the phrase was unknown to me at the time, robust civility characterised the discussion that ensued. He finished it memorably by commenting in relation to a book I urged upon him: "I've worked out that I've only got time left in life to read another thousand books and I'm not going to read any drivel." I'm not sure how much I changed my view on the key historical issues as a result of the conversation, but I had undoubtedly learnt a lot.

Fostering an intellectual culture that promotes the general powers of the mind in this way, raises questions far beyond, rightly far beyond, the role of a regulator but absolutely central to those who lead our universities. What does it take to foster the kind of culture I'm advocating? What do you do if, in parts of the university, the culture falls short? And, in any case, what evidence can ground such perspectives? I simply ask the questions.

One key aspect of a university where the leadership can certainly affect the culture is in academic appointments. This is obviously a crucial ingredient in creating a culture. Who is appointed and who isn't? What value is placed explicitly on diversity of perspective as well as other aspects of diversity? How often does groupthink, conscious or unconscious, influence appointments? How often do we hear that someone has been turned down, not on the quality of their track-record in research and teaching, but because

existing faculty took the view that the proposed appointee "would not fit in"?

A recent Policy Exchange report, *Academic Freedom in the UK*, concluded that "...there is widespread support for discrimination on political grounds in publication, hiring and promotion. This threatens academic freedom and likely results in self-censorship." The authors base this conclusion on a survey of academics which suggested, among other things, that only "54% of academics said that they would feel comfortable sitting next to a known Leave supporter at lunch...A third of academics would seek to avoid hiring a known Leave supporter" and that, "between a third and a half of those reviewing a grant bid would mark it lower if it took a right-wing perspective."[13] Perhaps for these reasons, only 30 percent of academics in the social sciences and history took the view that, even outside the classroom, a Leave supporter would be "comfortable expressing their beliefs to a colleague".[14]

Some have challenged the selection of questions in the Policy Exchange survey but, even allowing for a generous margin of error, the picture painted in the report must surely be a matter of concern. The issues it raises go far beyond those raised in the lines just quoted. Who selects and shapes the curriculum? What books are selected, or not, for the library? What books are on display in the campus bookshop? What counts as a good essay or answer in an exam?

The case is consistently made, and rightly, for equity, diversity and inclusion in relation to social background, gender, ethnicity, religion, age and disability. Should it not be made with similar vigour for diversity of perspective? As Matthew Syed has argued, cognitive dissonance enhances

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13 Adeyoka, R., Kaufmann, E., Simpson, T., 2020. 'Academic freedom in the UK: Protecting viewpoint diversity', Policy Exchange, pp.7-8. https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Academic-freedom-in-the-UK.pdf
14 Ibid. p.10

the quality of decision-making. "Rebel ideas", in his words, are to be welcomed.

I don't underestimate the challenge for contemporary universities in establishing the kind of culture I am advocating here. Perhaps I will be accused of naiveté, in which case I plead guilty. I simply point out that all the alternatives are worse, much worse. In fact, I'd argue strongly that the emphasis I am giving to an intellectual culture, which values and encourages genuine diversity of perspective, is not just consistent with the emphasis on access and participation in the first section, but integral to it. How can we possibly open up our universities to every strand of our diverse, modern, global societies unless we foster in them the most diverse range of perspectives possible within the law?

Incidentally, I don't subscribe at all to the view that the current generation of students are "snowflakes". In fact, I only use the word to criticise it. I have met many students on my university visits; I find them genuinely inspiring – not only are they much more polite than I was as a student forty years ago, they are also committed, hardworking, open-minded and determined to face up to the challenges the future seems likely to bring. When I ask students what they would like to see improved in their experience, their priorities are more and better study spaces and prompt, specific one-to-one feedback on assignments. They are serious in the best sense of the word. Think about it for a moment. Why should we be surprised that this is the case? The data make plain that current students are the best educated generation in the history of our country. If you are 65, as I am, perhaps you find this difficult to believe, as I do – but that doesn't make it any less true.

Robbins would surely look in admiration at this generation; perhaps, in fact, the progress since 1963 would be beyond his wildest dreams. Given the demands of our time, I imagine he might have thought that among those "general

powers of the mind" two in particular need greater emphasis among students today; the ability to listen and the acquisition of resilience. Let me briefly explore each of these.

To listen well, to really listen, requires active effort, effort, above all, to make sure that the words of the speaker have not just been heard but actually understood. The women who appear in Bob Dylan's songs are many and varied. To some of them he gives a very hard time but among those he truly admires is one of whom he says, "she knows too much to argue or to judge." Of course, universities are places where arguments and judgements should be made but they should surely also be places where opinions and ideas are heard, listened to, understood, weighed and perhaps sometimes cherished, before the argument begins or the judgement is made. Knowing when not to leap to express a view is a quality too, as Bob Dylan (who dropped out of the University of Minnesota after a year) must clearly have understood.

All this, surely, we should find in a House of Wisdom.

On resilience, I contend along with many others, that it can only be developed through experience, through rising to challenges and from understanding that feeling "uncomfortable" is not something to be avoided but something to be sought – that is, after all, why we hear the phrase "out of my comfort zone" most often used in relation to memorable moments in someone's life. It is why I defined a positive intellectual culture in the way I did. There is an unfortunate tendency in some quarters these days not merely to see students as snowflakes but also to treat them as if they are.

To be clear, I strongly support the growth in the capacity and effectiveness of student mental health services; there have always been students who experience mental ill health, and too often in the past this was not properly identified, still

less addressed. With the growth in student numbers, these needs have grown. I salute the work that many universities have undertaken to respond to these challenges. It is vital work and not what I am talking about here.

The tendency I am referring to is best described in the work of Lukianoff and Haidt. Greg Lukianoff is a top lawyer and expert on the First Amendment; Jonathan Haidt is a world-renowned social psychologist. Their 2018 book *The Coddling of the American Mind* lays bare the direction of travel in the US. They argue that good intentions based on "three bad ideas" are doing increasing damage to the intellectual culture of American higher education and, as a result, to an entire generation of young people. They describe these bad ideas thus.

1. The Untruth of Fragility: What doesn't kill you makes you weaker

Hence, they argue, a growing belief that students need to be protected from ideas and facts that might be uncomfortable.
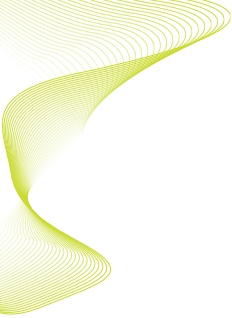
2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always trust your feelings

Hence, they argue, the growing view that whether a statement or action is a "micro-aggression" is entirely a matter of the listener's interpretation.

3. The Untruth of Us versus Them: Life is a battle between good people and evil people

Hence, they argue, that identity politics increasingly leads to defining an identity in relation to a common enemy – good versus evil – rather than in relation to a common humanity.

The book gives plenty of examples of these Untruths in action and of how good intentions based on these bad ideas lead to serious threats to freedom of speech and thought on

campus. The most absurd examples they give are a ban, at the University of Connecticut, on "inappropriately directed laughter" and a rule at Jacksonville State University in Alabama which says, "No student shall offend anyone on University property."

I am glad to say that I have yet to see examples of equivalent absurdity here in Britain. I don't think that what Lukianoff and Haidt describe as "the culture of safety-ism" is out of control here, at least not yet. I draw it to your attention because I see straws in the wind. I see the speed with which some unfashionable ideas are condemned. I see the growing courage required to express certain ideas that are well within the law. And I see orthodoxies established and accepted which limit debate. Incidentally, these issues are not confined to the social sciences and the humanities; ask any scientist whose findings have challenged a well-established orthodoxy. Galileo is not the only one to have suffered as a result.

I ask two questions; do you see any signs that we might be heading in the direction Lukianoff and Haidt describe? If so, isn't this the time to speak up for the fullest possible freedom of speech, for academic freedom and for robust civility? If not, there is every reason to speak up for these things in any case, because they are fundamental to the health of our culture and the argument for them always needs to be made. Moreover, the reputation of our higher education institutions depends on their ability to command public confidence, which in turn means they need to be clear what they stand for. This surely is essential if we are to create and sustain Houses of Wisdom.

Question 3: What should scholarship look like in a House of Wisdom?

In 1979-80, Dame Helen Gardner accepted a prestigious invitation to become the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard and delivered a series of lectures which were later published. The book was entitled *In Defence of the Imagination* and became a classic of literary criticism. Though I am no student of literature, I read it and loved it.

In her lectures she took the opportunity to contest the view of literature which had become fashionable, even an orthodoxy, during the previous decade; the view, originating in French philosophy, that a piece of literature was a text, nothing more. The only thing that mattered, therefore, was what the reader made of it. No right or wrong interpretation only a subjective response. (As an aside, I'll point out that the second bad idea referred to above is a distant echo of this view.) Even the author is irrelevant.

Gardner's book was, in her words, "a restatement of the humanist belief in the value of the study of literature as the core of a liberal education 'in the whirl of new doctrines' today."[15] She argued for a restoration of the author and interpretation to what she believed was their rightful place. She argued that students who only learnt the then fashionable approach which she was disputing, would find they had "mislaid one of the greatest human qualities: intellectual curiosity, the desire to enlarge his being by learning about something other than himself."[16]

No need here to take sides in that debate, fascinating though it might be; what I want to consider is how we would characterise this piece of work today. It was published four years before the first Research Assessment Exercise but, I dare say, had there been one, it could have been cited in a submission. Does that make it "research"? No doubt Helen Gardner drew on it in her teaching too. Does that

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15   Gardner, H., 1982. *In Defence of the Imagination* (Oxford University Press), p.2
16   Ibid., p.25

make it "teaching"? Perhaps it has an element of both but it is also neither; in my view it is something else altogether, scholarship. She was drawing on a lifetime of reading literature and thinking, teaching and writing about literature to contest a view she thought was destructive.

I found it compelling and it changed the way I understood literature. That, however, is irrelevant to my argument here. My point is this; scholarship of this quality is surely one of the most important contributions (perhaps, over the long run, the most important) universities make to our society and culture. Great scholarship that challenges orthodoxies and shifts our understanding of the world we are in. It is fundamental to the growth of the human mind and the depth of our culture. The place we are most likely to find it is in a university. Do we currently cherish it sufficiently?

I have listed as an appendix a handful of books I happen to have read over the years that represent, obviously just in my view, equivalent great scholarship across a range of subjects. There is no pattern to the list – except that at some point each of them appealed to me and influenced my thinking. I'm a historian by background so there is a bias in that direction. Nearly all of them were written by people working in universities, but even in the case of those that weren't, you will find, if you check the acknowledgements, that university people and libraries were vital ingredients. Some of the books were easier to read than others, but all of them excited, in Helen Gardner's words, my intellectual curiosity and "enlarged" my being. In my words, my life would have been much diminished if I hadn't stumbled across them. They are cited simply to give the reader an idea of what I mean by scholarship.

In our contemporary dialogue about universities, there is great emphasis on utility, on the contribution research and teaching make to the regional, national and global economy; and on the value of a degree, measured in future earnings as set out, for example, in the LEO data. Sometimes too,
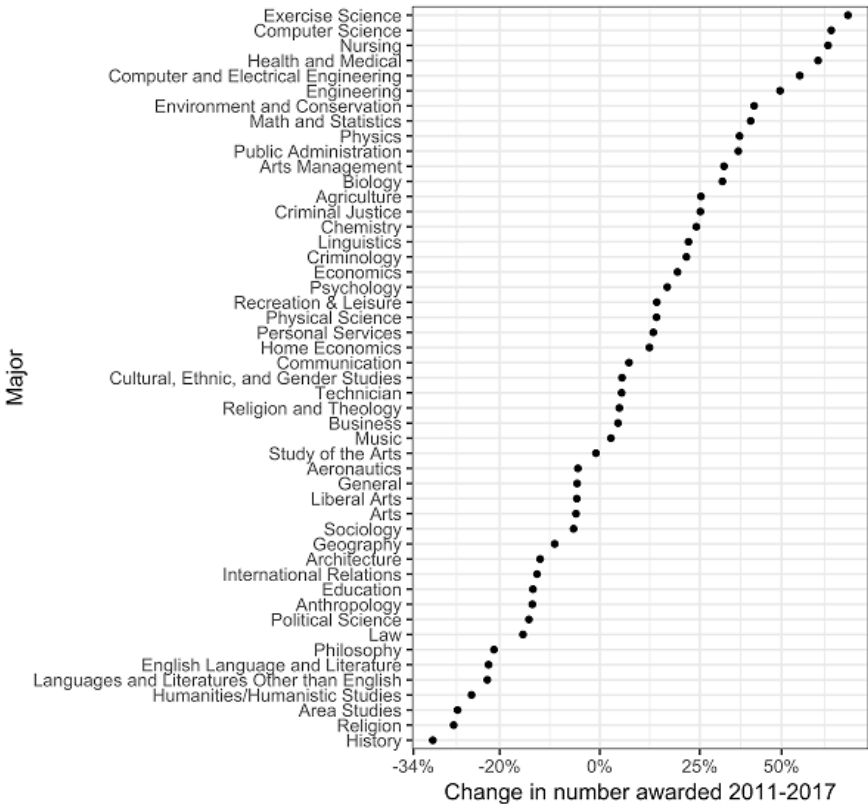
the idea that universities make, or should make, a civic contribution is added; when this is done well it most certainly enriches communities. Each of these contributions to the future are hugely important to individuals, communities and society. A problem arises only if we believe these things are all that universities contribute.

These categories miss or, at best, leave implicit the notion of scholarship. Yet it is in scholarship that ideas are born or contested, insights revealed, and imaginations opened to new possibilities. To give a minor example, when I was an undergraduate, my medieval history tutor once recommended an obscure article in the English Historical Review entitled *What did not Happen in Stephen's Reign*; I can't remember any more what did and didn't, but I've been aware ever since of the counterfactual and its importance in argument.

Scholarship of this kind is not confined to the humanities or social sciences. Far from it. It is possible and necessary across every subject and, increasingly, at the intersection of subjects. Nevertheless, because in the hard sciences there is (very welcome) substantial and increasing investment in research, perhaps the case for scholarship needs to be made most boldly in relation to the humanities, the arts and social sciences.

Since plenty of students continue to choose these subjects, bringing with them their tuition fees, there is no impending crisis. However, we will put them at risk if we fail to prioritise them, or fail to recognise scholarship as an end in itself, regardless of utility, and see it merely as luxury. The threat is not sudden catastrophe but downward drift which somehow doesn't get noticed till too late. The trend in the US is far from encouraging as the table below illustrates.

It breaks my heart to see that history is in such steep decline. I don't believe the widely held view that what happens now in America is necessarily a sign of things to come here. I am including this table in the hope of having precisely the opposite effect. At the very least, we need to be aware of this trend.

The other threat to subjects such as history is the groupthink in parts of the academy that I described in the previous section. "True openness", argued Allan Bloom in his cri de coeur three decades ago, "means closedness to all the

charms that make us comfortable…"[17] In other words, once "comfortable", as opposed to "scholarship", becomes the objective of a university education, we have lost our way.

Scholarship, like research and teaching, depends not just on great thinking by great scholars but also on the infrastructure of knowledge that enables scholars to do their work, above all, on libraries and archives. It is all too easy to think of these merely as dusty collections of books or papers but neither libraries or archives are much use without librarians and archivists. Collections have to be managed or, more precisely, curated; obviously looked after and protected against heat, light and water. Crucially, they also have to be constantly refreshed and sometimes weeded out. As Richard Ovenden argues "…librarians and archivists, the custodians of the past…are (also) the advance guard of the future".[18]

There was a time, not so many centuries ago when, if you had the resources, you could aspire to have in your library every significant book there had ever been. Indeed, the early Abbasid caliphs had such aspirations: they sent scholars on extensive journeys in search of particular texts they had heard about but not seen; when they won wars, they sometimes demanded books as part of the peace settlement.

This aspiration obviously no longer makes sense for an individual library. Still modern technology connects libraries and archives across the world in ways that until recently were unthinkable. Thus, almost everyone can have access to almost everything. A revolution is happening in the management of knowledge, as profound as the Arab discovery of the Chinese art of making paper, or the invention of the printing press. It has huge potential. It is happening very rapidly, and we are in danger of missing

17 Bloom, T., 1988. *The Closing of the American Mind* (Penguin), p.42

18 Ovenden, R., 2020. *Burning the Books: A history of knowledge under attack* (John Murray), p.222
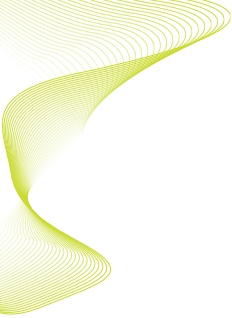
its significance and perhaps of making some irreversible mistakes.

This revolution in the management and storage of information, barely gets a mention in contemporary debate of universities. Senior staff salaries and grade inflation make headlines, libraries and archives don't. On university visits, (for example to Leeds, Birmingham and Queen's College, Oxford) I have seen evidence of major capital investment in new or modernised libraries. These places are places not just where knowledge and ideas are preserved, not just where scholarship is valued and fostered but also where, as Richard Ovenden says, students can find sanctuary. These are wonderful, the result of far-seeing university leadership taking advantage of low interest rates and/or generous benefactors, but all too often libraries and archives are seen merely as an overhead. In fact, they are a fundamental element of the infrastructure of knowledge, short, medium and long-term, vital to enabling teaching, research and scholarship of the highest quality now and in future.

But the renewal of a building is only the start. Books and archives have to be cared-for, cherished and curated for the very long run… What is at stake is the preservation of knowledge for an unknowable future. Today's utility, while clearly relevant, is not the most important issue. As Richard Ovenden concludes, "Libraries and archives take the long view of civilisation in a world that currently takes the short-term view. We ignore their importance at our peril."[19]

There are threats from fire and flood and sometimes, much worse, from the intentional burning of books for ideological reasons. (Ovenden gives dramatic and daunting examples of all these threats and quotes the famous warning from Heinrich Heine, "Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings.")

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19 Ibid., p.233

In that masterpiece of the grotesque, Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan*, the great library at Gormenghast burns down, a result of arson planned by Steerpike, the evil genius at the novel's heart. In the terrible conflagration the librarian, Sourdust, has been burned to death, only his charred skeleton remains, while, "[t]he shelves that still stood were wrinkled with charcoal, and the books were standing side by side upon them, black, grey and ash white, the corpses of thought."[20]

Corpses of thought.

Everyone surely would wish to guard against such devastation. Arson is an obvious threat but other threats may not be so clear-cut. While, for example, diversifying the curriculum should be welcomed, what are the potential consequences of "decolonising the curriculum" for libraries and archives? Might old texts or carefully stored archives go the same way as some statues recently or those books at Gormenghast?

Meanwhile the drive for digitisation goes on. It has many hugely positive aspects, such as the electronic connecting up of different libraries and the ability to store information in previously unimaginable quantities and to search it quickly and easily. The problem is we haven't made important, conscious, decisions about how these materials should be protected and who should control and oversee them. Wonderful though the devices and services of the big tech companies undoubtedly are, are these companies really the organisations we want to shape the preservation of our knowledge of the past and the present? Are they the organisations we want to make judgments about what is preserved and what isn't? Do they know (or care) about what is the best that has been thought and said? Should we,

20 Peake, M., 1946. *Titus Groan* (Vintage 1999; original edition, Eyre and Spottiswoode 1946) p.235

in Ovenden's words, place "the future of cultural memory under their control"?

Would that create Houses of Wisdom?

In any case, in this world of cybercrime, cyberwarfare and growing authoritarianism, how can we be sure for the very long-term, that the preservation will be secure? In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* Orwell explains that in the dystopia he describes "Every record has been destroyed or falsified... Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right."[21]

That is the polar opposite of Houses of Wisdom.

Perhaps then it would be better that these fundamental elements of the infrastructure of knowledge are housed in universities or great museums? Not in one institution but in many. Not in one country but in many. Just as diversity in access and participation should be fundamental to Houses of Wisdom, just as diversity of perspective should be fundamental to Houses of Wisdom, so diversity should apply to the way we think about libraries and archives. The fundamental choice is between giving control of the future of knowledge to the collection of companies that Shoshana Zuboff has labelled the "surveillance capitalists" or giving it to a network of Houses of Wisdom.
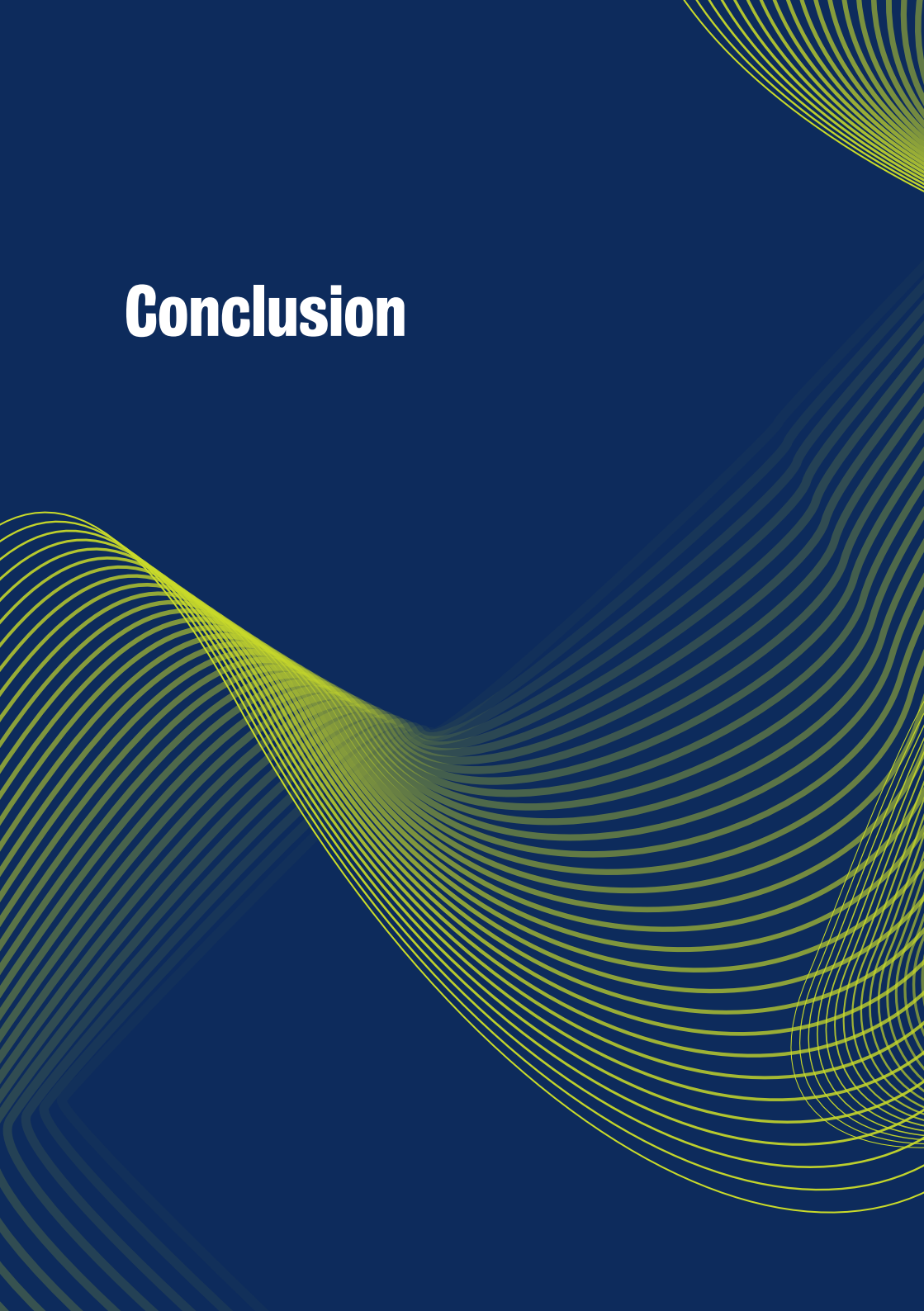
I doubt I am alone in preferring the second option but, if we accept that line of argument, we then face urgent, practical questions, not least regarding funding. That clearly shouldn't be the responsibility of current undergraduates. Though the case for them sharing some of the cost of their education through tuition fees is strong; that they should also bear the burden for a societies' cultural memory seems far-fetched. Similarly, it is hard to argue that Research

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21 Quoted from Ovenden, R., 2020. *Burning the Books: A history of knowledge under attack* (John Murray), p.230

Councils or Foundations should cover these costs in research grants. Ovenden proposes, therefore, that the private digital superpowers, who have after all proved adept at avoiding tax, should be subject to a "memory tax" which a society would then use to ensure transparent and principled preservation of knowledge. After all, the culture we pass on is a public good. The detail would, of course, be important but Ovenden's idea seems to be worth exploring.

Conclusion

The answer I have given to all three of my questions is in essence identical. It is about openness, about valuing and maximising diversity – in who our students are and what they study; in who our academics are and what they think, write and argue, and in what knowledge we preserve and who preserves it. I make this case because I believe it to be fundamental to our collective future and because I can't help believing that a great deal is potentially at risk.

Adelard of Bath, the twelfth century mediaeval scholar who had studied in Antioch and travelled elsewhere across what we would now call the Middle East, grasped the importance to Christendom of the body of Islamic knowledge that had originated in the House of Wisdom. On his return he lectured his English peers on their shortcomings.

> "For I have learned one thing from my Arab masters, with reason as a guide...you (here in England) follow a halter, being enthralled by the picture of authority. For what else can authority be but a halter? ...you are enthralled and bound by brutish credulity."[22]

Several centuries later, as all the early hopes of the French Revolution descended into tyranny and brought war to his native Spain, Goya drew a remarkable picture in which a scholar sleeps.[23] Strange creatures clamour around him. The Spanish words on his desk translate as "The Sleep of Reason Creates Monsters."

Adelard and Goya, centuries apart from each other and from us, warn of ever-present dangers.

Meanwhile, no-one has made the positive case better than a brilliant artist and thinker who was imprisoned precisely for his diversity of thinking in one of the most closed, most

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22 Lyons, J., 2010. *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (Bloomsbury), p.124
23 https://www.arthistory.udel.edu/news/PublishingImages/2017/goya-monsters-171108.jpg?RenditionID=5

uniform, societies ever created, Soviet Czechoslovakia. Writing in 1975 from his prison cell to Gustáv Husák, the President, he set out the case for freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

> "For we never know when some inconspicuous spark of knowledge may suddenly light up the road for the whole of society, without society ever realising perhaps how it came to see the road. But that is far from being the whole story. Even those other flashes of knowledge which never illuminate the path ahead…have their deep social importance, if only through the mere fact that they happened: that they might have cast light; that in their very occurrence they fulfil a certain range of society's potentialities – either its creative powers or simply its liberties; they too help to make and maintain the climate of civilisation without which none of the more effective flashes could ever occur."[24]

Towards the end of his life, when, in a wonderful turn of events, Vaclav Havel had become President himself, I had the privilege of shaking this great man's hand in the castle in Prague. He more than anyone I've ever met, reminds me that ultimately you have to know what you stand for. What do our universities stand for? Do we know? If so, do we spell it out? Let me conclude by doing that from my perspective.

I am in favour of universities providing a pathway to gainful employment for students. I am in favour of their contribution to economic growth and regeneration, locally and nationally. I am in favour of their civic contribution. I am in favour of good teaching and learning, digital or otherwise. I am in favour of research, especially fundamental research. And as I've argued, I believe profoundly in the importance of scholarship. I hope too that every student will have a fulfilling experience of higher education and make memories

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24 Vaclav Havel writing to Gustáv Husák (then general secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party), April 1975
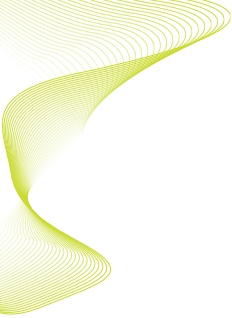
that last a lifetime. I have sought, as chair of the OfS, to have played a modest part in advancing these agendas.

Wonderful and important though all these elements of a university are, none of them is what I believe they should stand for. How do you know what it is you really stand for? Ask yourself, "What would I lie in front of a steamroller or tank to defend?" I would do that to defend Vaclav Havel's vision, especially as it relates to universities. His vision depends ultimately on the combination of the elements of a university I've just listed, above all on the culture which nurtures and nourishes them.

Couldn't we, the British, drawing deeply on the better angels of our history and culture, be the best in the world at that? Could we?

Perhaps we could match Baghdad in the 8th Century? Perhaps we could do better still? How can we ensure we light, continuously, rather than douse, those "sparks of knowledge" which "make and maintain the climate of civilisation"? Without them how can we make and maintain a truly free society? Without the free-est of free speech, albeit within the law, there can be no Houses of Wisdom.

Annex 1: Six works of scholarship I've enjoyed

Peter Frankopan (2015) *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*

A radical retelling of the history of the world, centred on central Asia and drawing on sources in languages as diverse as Chinese, Russian, Farsi, Turkish and Hindi, not just English. A superbly written dose of humility for anyone who thinks the culmination of history was the triumph of the West.

Rachel Hewitt (2010) *Map of a Nation: A Biography of the Ordinance Survey*

The remarkable story of how, starting in the middle of the 18th Century, Britain was first mapped. Wonderful characters and deep insights into the role maps play in the world (starting with social control) and new perspectives on British history. (Maps remain something Britain excels at.)

Margaret Macmillan (2001) *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and its Attempt to End War*

A dazzling account of the Versailles and other Paris treaties with a remarkable and sometimes eccentric cast of characters wrestling with immense geo-political challenges; profound insights throughout into how personalities, principles and power interact, and how the need for a quick fix often has lasting consequences.

Geoffrey Parker (2013) *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*

One of those works you simply can't believe is possible, yet there it is, powerful and very readable. Global in perspective and, for the first time, integrating the climate data, pulled together over the last twenty years, with historical events and more traditional explanations of what happened and why. The Little Ice Age of the time put pressure on societies and their rulers – in 1620-1, the Bosphorus froze over and

stayed that way for forty days. If there is a moral for our times, it is that it makes a big difference to ordinary people how leaders respond to remorseless pressures such as climate change.

Alan Ryan (2012) *On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*

The story of Western political thought told with authority, insight and wit. A classic work that will stand the test of time and still be enjoyed generations from now.

Jackie Wullschlager (2008) *Chagall: Love and Exile*

A brilliant, powerful and moving life of one of the 20th Century's greatest artists. The author both tells the story and explains the paintings with deftness and profound understanding. Her book is a great example of scholarship outside academia, but as her acknowledgements make plain, she drew extensively on collections and archives in museums, galleries and libraries as well as universities.

The books listed here are just examples which I happened to love reading but there are many more works that could have been cited.

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