

Newman's *Idea of The University* for the Twenty-first Century

Imagined by Jeremy Black and William Gibson.

I am a traveller in an antique land, finding trunkless legs of stone and shattered visages with frown, wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command. And on the pedestal appear hated names of those whose monuments are thus destroyed. Rhodes the worse, but followed by other bloody tyrants of empire –Havelock and Churchill to the fore.

It was tough being the university administrator of the decolonisation edicts, but now, with any apparently dissenting staff removed as difficult or intimidating (my idea of a joke), my task nearing completion, I have time to survey my work and that of fellow administrators of the new order.

Each day I, for my leisure and my pleasure, survey the ruined remnants of the colossal wreck of the old order.

Today, I went to the 'Old Library,' now as one with the cloistered fragments of the onetime monastery. Books of course we declared pointless once all information was digitised and all opinion thus scrutinised, reviewed and deployed. We started with throwing books into skips – I can remember the parliamentary records discarded in a skip in Exeter in the 2000s, then burned them until told of the environmental risk, and thus left the rest to gather dust in the now discarded dump of past opinion and image, with shattered statues and paintings of woe part of the tableau.

No door barred my entry and I entered with the paper-gnawing beetle. I looked with scorn at the works, Pope Alexander and a misspelt title, and then found and took down Arnold Matthew's *Thoughts on Education* and Newman John's *Idea of a University*.

Newman asked, what is the soul of a university? What is its purpose? I laughed, it is, of course, to ensure that students are imprinted with the idea of quality to become better citizens of the new world. Quality assurance is what students want, and that is what we should provide them with –in quantity. What marks the best university is where quality assurance exists for its own end, not for some mere utilitarian purpose. The essence of the academic endeavour is to complete the maximum number of quality assurance processes in the course of a degree programme (I would refer you to the University's Quality Handbook and Regulations, volume 6). Without such processes, I fear, students can fall into a meaningless void and lose direction. Quality and quantity can merge.

I saw that Newman's curriculum for a university rested on the three great pillars: faith, letters and preaching. In our world, we can have faith that all academics have conflicts of interest and will seek to teach and research subjects that they ought not to. Without guidance from the top of the university, our wayward educationalists would stray into fields in which they have deep expertise –and that expertise might not be understood by those set over them. Faith is not something that can be taken on trust. I see that it must be checked, quantified and measured against outcomes and key performance indicators. The New Creed of managerialism, in which we must all believe, ensures that academics are not creative, or original in their thinking, otherwise they undermine faith in quality assurance.

Letters are the second great pillar of Newman's university. I guffawed at the letters of evaluation, letters of student need and fragility and, above all, letters of complaint and grievance. Without such letters, the student is rudderless. I realised that students can only maintain their sense of self if they can develop the skills of employability in which such letters play a proper part. Without a student's ability to evaluate the teachers in a university, how can they write letters of complaint that will ensure another re-evaluation of their grades? And keep us academics and administrators disciplined?

I saw that preaching is all-important, it is the prime vocation for which Newman's university existed. We need to equip students with the right tone and mannerism in their pulpits when they preach. They must calibrate their victimhood, craft their grievances, and identify their fragility and the likelihood that something will 'trigger' them. These are all processes that must be mastered before the student can be released into the world.

The university of the twenty-first century, and the modern knowledge economy, cannot be chained to the trivia of ideas and understanding. Its duty is to prepare students to take their place in identifying the new injustices, which we have not yet identified.

And then I thought of Shelley:

And Anarchy, the Skeleton,
Bowed and grinned to every one,
As well as if his education
Had cost ten millions to the nation.