
Reply to the Rector of the University

Charles University, 18 November 2002
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Dame Fiona Caldicott, Pro-Vice-Chancellor

Thank you for the very great honour that you have bestowed upon the University of Oxford by the award of this medal, commemorating the events of the Second World War. It is a very great pleasure to be with you here at Charles University. Sir Colin Lucas has asked that I give his sincere apologies that he is not able to join you in person. It is a matter of deep regret to him that he is prevented from doing so by business of the utmost importance which has detained him in the United Kingdom.

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Most, if not all of us, will have spent our entire adult lives in the provision of education. The occasion of International Students Day, which is itself a commemoration of the dreadful events of 17 November 1939, presents an appropriate opportunity to reflect on what it is that Universities are for, and what we mean when we talk about scholarship. Universities have an essential function in our societies. Society invests in them its ambition to fuse the inheritance of the past with the invention of the future. This reflects our collective desire not simply to continue but to improve, to take our inheritance and make a better world from it just as each generation before us has sought to do. On the whole, the general public of a society are not very aware that universities have this function. Insofar as they come in contact with them, they see universities predominantly in terms of individual enhancement. Now, this is not an unreasonable way to look at universities. On the one hand, they do indeed focus very much on growing the individual, on liberating the potential of the individual student. On the other hand, societies need mechanisms for endowing bright young people with the skills to lead the society forward. In our traditions, the sum of each individuals' pursuit of personal gain is seen to benefit the collective interest, subject to whatever mechanisms are needed to regulate or moderate the interplay between individuals' self-interest.

In fact, however, universities' principal social function is actually of a significantly different order. Individuals attending universities and pursuing a course of personal enhancement are also participating in a wider enterprise, even though they are rarely aware of it in these terms. This enterprise is the one that I referred to earlier: fusing the inheritance of the past with the invention of the future. Universities are stewards of the past in this sense that they constitute the reservoir of accumulated knowledge and experience in all domains. Universities are moreover, as their name implies, universal in two ways. They are universal in that they seek to embrace the whole range of knowledge and experience from the purely spiritual through to the purely material or physical. They are universal also in that they try to embrace knowledge and experience from the many world cultures that lie beyond that mix of cultures that distinctively constitutes their own.

If universities were only storehouses, they would be neither interesting nor useful. The difficulty is that, beyond some basic building blocks, there is nothing as uncertain as knowledge. What one individual or generation believes to be incontrovertibly true, another will see as flawed, if not actually wrong. Universities are, thus, constantly engaged in an interrogative dialogue with this knowledge that comes from the past, including from the very recent past. Our business is to try to distinguish what is only apparently true from what is true, as best we may determine that at any given moment. Our business is constantly to question what we think we know, and constantly to test it against problems which we pose to it. I do not think that new ideas are ever generated out of thin air. They are always rooted in the soil of accumulated knowledge, they always sprout within borders defined by procedures and techniques developed previously. This is true even when ideas, forms and so on are explicitly formulated in repudiation of, or in opposition to, inherited knowledge: in a real sense, one can always trace how what is repudiated does itself condition what can be newly thought. It is the questions that we put to our existing knowledge that lead us forward.

What our questions and tests do above all is to generate new knowledge as a response. In part, this is discovery, in the sense of revealing the previously hidden or uncovering the mechanism of the previously unexplained. More often, it is a matter of making new sense of what is going on, a matter of giving new and more powerful meaning. This is not just any meaning arbitrarily decided by ourselves; it is arrived at by tests which produce rational meaning that holds true in

as diverse and complex situations as possible. We seek an understanding that is as universal as we can achieve. This process is the invention of the future, because the new knowledge gained from solving the present problem liberates our potential to know what to do next. When applied to issues of contemporary society, what is liberated is our collective power to act. It is an essential function for the survival of societies, for the future of our societies, and for the future of our civilization. Civilization is constituted out of memory and knowledge, which is painfully acquired and easy to lose. It is the function of universities to hold that knowledge, to maintain the values of society, and indeed to maintain the values of civilization.

That brings me to the point and the purpose of your invitation to the University of Oxford to attend the commemorative events surrounding International Students Day. The closure of Czech Universities, including the Charles University, during the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, illustrates why we forget the purpose of universities at our peril. The struggle against oppression undertaken by our peoples and the solidarity between our countries at that terrible time in the history of Europe and of the World is a reminder of the ties which bind the academic community, wherever its members may be located. The University of Oxford is extremely proud of the links that it forged with the Charles University of Prague, like itself one of the oldest such institutions in Europe. It was indeed a very great privilege to enable Czechoslovak students to continue their studies and to be able to host the degree ceremonies for medical students from Charles University, as well as for students from the Masaryk University of Brno, and the Comenius University of Bratislava. It was a privilege to be able to make arrangements for scholars from the Charles University and from other Czechoslovakian institutions to study in Oxford during the Second World War. It was also a great privilege to be able to award the honorary degree of DCL to the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Eduard Beneš, on 7 March 1940.

I hope you will allow me to quote from a letter from President Beneš to the then Vice-Chancellor, Sir David Ross, written on 21 February 1945. It seems to me to represent the uncertainties of that time, to presage the uncertainties of the years after the war, and also to encapsulate the essence of what we mean today by the community of scholars.

In a few days' time, I shall have left London for Czechoslovakia. I regret very much that I could not pay another visit to Oxford before my long stay in this country came to an end....None of us can tell when the Czechoslovak Universities will be reopened. Prague, Brno and Bratislava are still in enemy hands. While my countrymen will, I am sure, lose no time in restoring the educational facilities of Czechoslovakia, they know well enough that it will take time to assemble the teaching staffs again, to restock the despoiled libraries and to secure the necessary equipment and scientific apparatus.

The task before the teachers of our young people is very formidable. But I know, Mr Vice-Chancellor, that we go back to Czechoslovakia with the good wishes of the University of Oxford. We shall not soon forget the encouragement which Oxford gave to all Czechoslovak citizens who reached this country during the war. Her example showed that, however many Universities might be closed on the Continent, the Germans in their brief authority could not successfully assail the Commonwealth of Learning.

The intellectual ties between Oxford and Prague will, I know, be far closer than in the past. We have to face special difficulties throughout the European Continent. Transport facilities will be few. Travelling will be severely restricted. I believe, however, that this difficult phase will be temporary and that soon the scholars of Europe will travel freely from one University town to another in Europe. Oxford men, as you know, will always be welcomed in Prague.

Rector, you have shown by your hospitality and generosity during our visit to Prague that this is still the case, and on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, and on behalf of the University of Oxford, I thank you most warmly for that.