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## **Universities are Not in the Usefulness Business**

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The primary job of universities is not to be useful. Their task is not to play a practical role in society. They should not principally aim to train men and women for careers. Their purpose is not to keep tax-payers happy. They ought not to focus on how to please users.

If you are a politician and do not like to hear this sort of thing, I am sorry. But I work in a university. It is my job to stick up for the truth rather than to toe the line with what is in fashion.

Wrongly, politicians across the western world have begun to press for utilitarian universities – ones that are focused on business needs. Society certainly needs usefulness and it is unwise to denigrate that. Vets' surgeries, dry cleaners, airports, firms that train drivers, firms that drive trains, farms, insurance offices -- all these are important and practical organizations. Countries have to have practicality by the bucket load. But it cannot be stressed too loudly -- we must hope this ends up on the desks of Margaret Hodge and Estelle Morris and others -- that the key function of a real university is not to be useful.

First, universities are in the truth business. Every other organization in a society has biases to burnish. If you know anything for sure, say a quiet thank you to a university somewhere. The bedrock of your entire understanding, and conception of the world, was built up over centuries in university labs and lecture rooms and libraries. It was worked out by people you have never met. Universities sift facts from the large supply of untruths and propaganda that fills our everyday world. Human progress is built on those discoveries.

Second, universities are in the excellence business. Like an Olympics training village, they slice their purses from silk (whether from poor or rich homes). Society needs genius, though there is nothing egalitarian about it.

Third, universities are in the freedom business. Even the best journalists have to stick to a publication's line, whether they can admit it to themselves or not. By contrast, a university, more than any institution in the western world, has enshrined in its constitution both the expectation of a fundamental tolerance of other people's opinions and the right to freedom of speech. This is nothing to do with usefulness. It is a way of fostering robust knowledge and a safety valve for social stability.

Fourth, and paradoxically at first glance, universities are in the elegance business. I recently attended public lectures by Ian Stewart and Susan Bassnett, two senior British academics. I was struck by the fact that the common thread binding together Nature's mathematical shapes and the history of Italian language was not a practical thing at all. It was a kind of fundamental concern, more subconsciously than consciously, for order and beauty. That is probably because of the intellectual rewards from symmetry. Find some symmetry and of course it will often turn out to be, as university researchers have found for countless generations, a kind of key that can click open the most solid of padlocks.

Despots do not burn useful things. That is why so many have left a university smoking. Politicians find universities bewildering for the very reason that universities are not in the utilitarian business. Useful universities is by and large an oxymoron. Show me a society that demands usefulness of its universities and I will show you a civilisation that has forgotten the deep bulwarks upon which it balances when the wind gets up.

True, the *raison d'être* of universities is going to be difficult to explain to Britain's population. That, in turn, leaves our great institutions of higher education exposed to trouble. Today's practical philistinism would probably shut down philosophy departments, Renaissance research centres, mathematical economics seminars, poetry classes, art history lectures, tutorials in number theory, and most other things that go on inside a great university.

There are three ways to resist.

One is to think harder about how to shake off our dependence on

taxpayers' cash. The longer we stay under the thumb of the public sector, in my judgement, the harder it will be to withstand the view that a university should be a kind of giant, practical, greying high school. I believe it is vital we think about leaving government behind to stand on our own feet and principles.

Another defence, for the shorter term, is to remind all politicians of the large returns to a liberal arts education. The Ivy League institutions in the US make a natural benchmark and example.

And more of us will have to write articles like this one -- if we actually want to be in the surviving business.