

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

This was the 11th Glion Colloquium and arguably the most successful, distinguished both by the quality of the papers and the discussion. Unlike in many previous meetings, there was less emphasis on the more familiar themes of research opportunities, financial sustainability, good governance, leadership and educational access and affordability. These topics were by no means absent. And neither were the extraordinary breakthroughs in science and technology which may well define the next generation for the world's leading research universities: artificial intelligence, gene editing, big data and so on.

But there was a palpable sense of a long shadow having been cast across the world of higher education since the previous meeting in 2015 and indeed in the months between the Colloquium being organized and it actually taking place in June 2017. Some presentations were hastily revised; the discussions were more outward-looking than was customary. What was somewhat obliquely referred to as “context” predominated.

The cause of this was of course the tumultuous political events of 2016 in both Europe and the United States. The result of the referendum in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, together with the “new populism” which they reflected, demanded a reconsideration of hitherto rather taken-for-granted assumptions of the role of higher education in contemporary society, its direction of travel and the perceived failures of the academy to see it coming.

The sense of threat was more than merely abstract. In a world of “post-truth” and fake news, how was future knowledge to be accepted and legitimated? And what were the implications for academic freedom, curriculum content and educational pedagogy?

There was also some genuine anxiety that perhaps the 18th-century Enlightenment ideal of the growth of knowledge leading to social progress had run its course. How could the astonishing advances in science and technology be accompanied by the economic and social polarization now so manifest? And how far were we, as leading research universities, complicit in this process? There was some sense that we may have failed in our educational role. In the long arc of post-war university expansion, we had rather assumed, though rarely pronounced, that an increasing number of graduates would lead to a world at once more prosperous, more tolerant, more respectful of human rights and more civilized. It would also be more global, or at least more internationalized. We were educating not just national but global citizens to tackle the big issues of the 21st century: climate change, resource sustainability, poverty, health, peace. In time, through our efforts in research and education, the world would become a better place.

And, of course, in so many ways, it has. But there was a sense that in 2016 this world had shifted on its axis. The global financial crisis was frequently referred to as a defining moment. Ten years on, large parts of Europe and North America, at least, were still living in an age of austerity. It was increasingly difficult to persuade those who had seen their local factories or coal mines or shipyards close of the benefits of economic globalization; or to sell the advantages of the new gig economy and its attendant insecurities as a worthwhile substitute. Only one per cent of the population have benefited from the new liberal economy. Meanwhile, whole communities have been hollowed out and left behind. They found their voice in the elections of 2016. It was not lost on the participants at the Colloquium that the key enabling technology of economic liberalization, the Internet, was rooted in the worldwide web and the research endeavours of the physicists and engineers at CERN.

Furthermore, and closer to home, the decade or more of austerity has had a profound effect on inter-generational equity. Unemployment rates among young people, including graduates, have risen sharply. Careers, in the old-fashioned sense, are scarce and less secure. A generation has become more disaffected and pessimistic. Increasingly strident political voices accuse universities of having failed to meet the needs of society. "Is it worth it?" is a question asked increasingly by both potential students and by political paymasters.

If this were not enough, universities are now faced with the vexed issue of migration and multi-culturalism. Universities worldwide have been in the vanguard of internationalism. Student and staff mobility has increased enormously, sometimes, as in Europe, as a result of official policy, but equally often as a result of individual choice. Universities, and indeed whole higher-education systems, have adopted measures of internationalization as key performance indicators. It was a trend viewed not only as benign but highly positive in educating students for an increasingly multicultural and multinational future.

But little of this seems to have rubbed off on the anti-migrant, and sometimes downright racist, discourse of the new populist politics: quite the contrary.

So is the future of the university — the Colloquium's original title — one of continuing crisis, losing both popular and political support? Students, it should be remembered, still flock to universities in increasing numbers; and research in universities is still viewed by governments and industry as a key component of innovation and international competitiveness. Perhaps, though, the changing context of 2016 has provided a reality check for higher education. The wider societal benefits cannot be taken for granted. The communities left behind by decades of globalization need to be embraced and listened to. We must be seen as part of the solution for them and not part of the problem. They, after all, are citizens too.

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