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## The TU Way: An Bhfuil Tú Ag Teacht?

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## **The TU Way – an bhfuil tú ag teacht?**

**Larry McNutt**

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I am currently moving office, which is a dangerous endeavour at any stage particularly when you are a hoarder like me – and contributing to this dilemma is that I am currently saturated in data all beautifully bound in glossy reports describing everything from student engagement, access data, graduate outcomes, completion rates, gender equality to staff profiles. As I fill another box with these hefty tomes, I am reminded of Jonathon Swift’s assertion that “*We have enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.*” In the context of Higher Education, we have enough evidence to make us realise that change is needed, but we never seem to have enough to make the change. Or perhaps we have reached a tipping point? – and that July 17<sup>th</sup> 2018 will go down in the history of Irish education as the date of a seismic shift! Well maybe not quite seismic, the first anniversary announcing the approval to create Ireland’s first Technological University passed off quietly. Our Taoiseach’s words on that day still resonate with me, his hope that TU Dublin would be

*“...nothing less than a new student centered learning environment developed on three fully serviced physical campuses and it is very much more than the sum of its parts. It's my hope that this new technological university will be a home for critical and free inquiry informed intellectual discourse on robust public debate. Serving the needs of the wider society, TU Dublin will have have the largest engagement with industry and community of any university and it will do so while respecting diversity of our values, beliefs and traditions.”*



Our invitation to re-conceptualise the current higher education offering – is to question the pervading grand narratives that shape our practice, our priorities, our vocabulary, our programme offerings and our ambitions, recognising when we are privileging particular sets of beliefs and forms of knowledge. Our obsession with data gathering in higher education needs to be questioned – we are drenched in numbers, graphs and spider diagrams – this distraction can have profound consequences as Yanis Varoufakis (2019, p.9) reminds us in relation to the economy “*the more scientific our models of the economy become the less relation they bear to the real, existing economy out there*”. Data driven decisions favour majority rule – the minority can never be statistically significant.

We must ensure that we stay close to the real lives of our learners and their communities. Many of the children born this year will be living on our planet in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. The responsibility of creating Ireland’s newest University is to try and imagine their struggles and ambitions. We need to design a University that will meet them where they are – their lived

experiences and not our perceptions of where we think they should be. A higher education experience needs to be appropriate and challenging for everyone engaged in it. We must cherish the learners that choose to join us – become a voice for their concerns, a beacon of hope that says “*Yes*” you can succeed and I am here to assist and support you. Education loves to measure - the illusion is the measurement – we must cherish the learner and not the “*measurement of the learner*”.

We are in the midst of one of this nation’s greatest design opportunities and we learned at the [UDHEIT2018 congress](#) that

- (i) if we want to be creative we cannot be cautious – there is no such thing as a “cautious creative”;
- (ii) (ii) to design for real learners we need to get to know them – “*nothing about us without us*“ and;
- (iii) (iii) the greatest innovations occur when you plan with the users at the edges. The consequences of ignoring these guidelines and practices can have distressing consequences as described by [Ciara O’Connor](#) on her recent visit to the Tate Gallery: “*And that’s when I got angry... all this lofty proto-academic talk about what makes “good” art about how it was time to move to more “non-quantifiable” criteria when the artist hadn’t even mastered the very basics: does it actively exclude paying visitors?*”

Among my many boxes of belongings there are reminders of my own University education - I graduated in 1981 - emerging from the protected world of a growing UCD campus, where the 14 computer science undergraduates inhabited a portacabin and carefully carried bundles of punch cards of algol-w code to the waiting arms of the computer centre staff. Modest teaching and learning facilities in comparison to today’s campus environments - but we cherished these spaces in contrast to the dark and dank bedsit in Rathmines. Of course, that is

my reminiscences of a higher education experience and the danger with nostalgia is that it is rarely accurate. We use it to extract the best from the past, the strong emotional pull of the “good old days” - the “Downton Abbey” era of Higher Education - a mythical time and place where everything was so much better – we even have data to prove it! Our current newspaper headlines are replete with examples of how some current politicians have successfully used nostalgia as the flip side of the “fear coin”, fear of change, the threat from immigrants, the loss of our culture - by selling a mythical story that we can go back to the way things were and everything will be fine.

Perhaps for me, TU Dublin will be a humble University (humility from “*humus*”) grounded from the earth. A humble university seems out of kilter with the Higher Education headlines of today cluttered with stories of world domination, first in class, best in category, endless claims of greatness, self-interest and status building. A competitive culture of winners and losers, and as a public servant, I can’t help feeling at odds with these assertions of world dominance – L’Oreal thinking “*s/he who dies with the most stuff wins*”. Can we truly argue that the educated class has steered the planet in a just and sustained way? “*The world has enough for everyone’s needs but not everyone’s greed*” as predicted by Mhatmata Ghandi some eighty years ago. Discussions to craft the University’s emerging strategic plan informed by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals provide us with a solid foundation on which to build. Social justice is our common ground nourished by care and love, a public University built on relationships - human interactions that operate in an unequal world.

As Parker Palmer (2017, p. 17) reminds us:

*“Relational trust is built on movements of the human heart such as empathy, commitment, compassion, patience, and the capacity to forgive.”*

## References

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Varoufakis, Y. (2019). *Talking to my daughter: A Brief history of Capitalism*. London: Vintage Publishing.