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Opinion Piece: What is the Idea of a University in 2025?

The QS World University Rankings 2025 have announced Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Imperial College London in first and second place respectively. Both universities prioritise the practical arts: MIT's motto is 'Mind and Hand', while Imperial's mission is 'To be useful'. While such rankings are not without controversy, it is clear that universities today prioritise the preparation of students for their future careers, with a strong emphasis on job training and practical skills. Employers, in turn, actively seek out graduates with not just a strong academic foundation but those with demonstrated skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaborative abilities. Graduate Attributes (also known as soft skills or employability skills) are in place for many universities today as they seek to develop graduates of international distinction. While they are defined differently from one provider to another, they generally include components which relate to the mastery of subject-specific knowledge study skills, digital literacies, sustainability and other twenty-first century skills. While graduate attributes are fostered in the context of the curriculum, they are also developed within the total university experience as they encourage students to reflect on the broader purpose of their university education. The idea of a university has evidently come a long way since John Henry Newman outlined his vision of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

And yet, higher education has long been a cornerstone of career development, equipping graduates with the knowledge and theoretical foundation necessary to thrive in their chosen fields. It serves as the cornerstone of intellectual and professional development, equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills and perspectives necessary to navigate an increasingly complex world. And as the landscape of work continues to undergo rapid transformation, traditional academic programmes, if we are honest, are struggling to keep pace: the rapid advance of artificial intelligence and the growing focus on sustainability are opening a significant gap between the knowledge students acquire in universities and the specific skills required in the workplace.

To this end, traditional academic programmes of study need to be augmented by providing students with specialised knowledge and practical skills tailored to their ambitions. Previously this has been achieved through laboratory experience and internships. More recently this is being augmented through simulated digital scenarios and innovative pedagogical approaches such as design thinking and hackathons. Hands-on training enables learners to bridge theory and practice, preparing them to tackle real-world challenges with confidence, fostering collaboration and teamwork, instilling the essential interpersonal skills that are now deemed indispensable in almost all professional settings. By acquiring such skills and associated certifications, students stand out to potential employers, increasing their chances of landing their dream job.

Universities today are moving beyond traditional classrooms by offering career-development workshops to equip students with skills such as CV writing, interview preparation and networking strategies, preparing them for the job-search process. Similarly, mentorship

programmes connect students with experienced professionals who can provide valuable insights into industry practices and career paths. Optional modules in specific skillsets introduce continuous learning and upskilling throughout a student's career journey, recognising that graduation marks the beginning of a life-long quest for knowledge, growth and self-discovery. Higher education plays a crucial role in cultivating such lifelong learners by instilling in students a passion for continuous improvement and intellectual curiosity.

By exposing learners to diverse perspectives, methodologies and fields of study, education encourages students to adopt a growth mindset and embrace lifelong learning as a cornerstone of personal and professional development. Moreover, it aims to equip individuals with the critical thinking skills and digital literacy necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. By equipping individuals with the tools they need to excel in their chosen careers, higher education can lay the foundation for a skilled workforce capable of driving innovation and progress in diverse sectors. And, by fostering a culture of lifelong learning, higher-education empowers individuals to adapt to change, seize new opportunities and contribute meaningfully to society throughout their lives.

But higher education must go further than preparing students for the world of work. It must also provide students with a rich intellectual environment, fostering knowledge of the world and critical thinking about the human condition. It must nurture ethical thinking, leadership qualities and a global perspective. Extracurricular activities, community engagement and placements are necessary to enhance students' personal growth. This underscores the need for a more integrated approach to education, where theoretical knowledge is combined with practical training opportunities, and programmes that align with industry needs can make graduates more competitive in the job market. To this end, the demand for competent professionals in enterprise, and staff in academia who understand the world of work, continues to soar.

Innovation lies at the heart of societal progress, driving advancements in technology, science, business and beyond. Higher education must serve as a catalyst for innovation by nurturing a culture of curiosity, experimentation and interdisciplinary collaboration. Through research projects, creative endeavours and experiential learning opportunities, students can be empowered to explore new ideas, challenge conventional wisdom and push the boundaries of knowledge. Universities must go further by encouraging adaptability and resilience, equipping individuals with the mindset and skills needed to navigate uncertainty and embrace change. By fostering a spirit of innovation among students, higher-education not only fuels economic growth and competitiveness but also addresses pressing global challenges, from climate change to culture disparities and more fundamental issues concerning democracy and freedom.

As we find ourselves a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century, collaboration between universities, industry leaders and students is essential to ensure our academic programmes of study remain relevant and impactful, preparing graduates to become skilled and adaptable lifelong learners, ready to make a significant impact on the world. As we look to the future, our

thinking about higher education must continue to evolve, driven by advances in technology, shifts in societal needs and ongoing efforts to enhance the quality and accessibility of education for all. In this dynamic landscape, education remains not only a means to an end but also a journey of discovery, growth and empowerment for individuals and communities worldwide. As universities continue to evolve, their role remains indispensable in shaping our collective future.

In Ireland, the establishment of technological universities was intended, among other things, to provide programmes of education and training that reflect the needs of individuals, business, enterprise, the professions, the community, local interests and other stakeholders in the surrounding regions. Yet, important questions remain, not least of which is the role of previously established universities in also achieving that aim. The sector is now overseen by a government Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, created to fund and create policy for the higher and further education and research sectors. And while the distinction between old and new universities might at one level appear self-evident, on another level it has not been clearly articulated. Recent comments attributed to the president of Imperial College to the effect that funding for technological universities in Ireland could damage our research-intensive universities are not especially helpful in this context. Our higher education sector needs to work together better, primarily to serve our population's needs, both intellectually and economically. To achieve that end we need strong leadership and a clear, shared vision of what we mean by a university in the twenty-first century. We owe this to our students, and to ourselves as citizens of a thriving economy and – more importantly in the current worldwide context – our democracy.

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