The social purpose of higher education in the 21st century:
SDGs Strategies of Universities and THE Impact Rankings

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What about our life in such an in-between time? I described this as a vacuum – an interregnum between two unreasonable certainties. If we use it as a short positive moment of uncertainty when choice is privileged, well then it becomes possible to emerge into a less ideological and more humanitarian era.

Old power works like a currency. It is held by few. Once gained, it is jealously guarded, ...

New power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it’s most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.

I sometimes think that Hitler would never have made the progress he had if German teachers in schools and universities as well as in the church had not so often been purely academic and remote from life and in particular from the life of the young.
As illustrated in long waves of prosperity (Kondratieff cycles)

https://medium.com/@riddhishethdash/what-are-the-innovations-that-are-predicted-to-unlock-economic-growth-in-the-6th-wave-5f195345e1e9
We – and universities – are living in an “in-between time”

• Students and young people are ‘digital natives’
• Variable economic growth and inequity
• Climate crisis (academic travel)
• New (and unique) set of Gen Z values
• Longevity (life-long learning)
• Rise of populism in a number of countries
• Globalization of knowledge (‘decolonizing the curriculum’)
• End of ‘new public management’?
• Place-based politics and place making (‘levelling up’, ‘civic universities’)
• Global pandemics ….
Lessons to be learnt from the private sector

• There has been a shift from the notion of ‘corporate social responsibility’ to ‘shared value’ (Kramer and Porter 2011)

• Endorsement from leading business commentators:
  • “There is a growing acceptance among business leaders of the need to broaden the pursuit of shareholder value to one that is based on inclusivity, sustainability and purpose”.
  
    Editorial Financial Times, 27 October 2019

• Important not to over emphasise the impact shared value has had on the private sector; critics will argue that a lot of this is still window dressing using new business jargon and that genuine shared value is rare

• Shift from CSR to shared value, mirrors the shift that universities need to make from ‘public engagement’ to ‘social responsibility’ (Bull and Grant, 2019)
Serving local communities

Proportion of case studies with city level impact to number of case studies submitted to REF 2014 (HEI’s with 10 or fewer submissions excluded)
King’s adopted ‘Service’ as its way of delivering social responsibility within its academic mission

“It was an opening not only of college doors, but of doors into higher life for hundreds of men who have since shown how prompt and how able they were to pass over the threshold when the bolts were once drawn.”

Dickens (1858), p58 quoted in Hearnshaw (1929), p256
What King’s means by Service

Social reform

Educational experience

Research impact

Volunteering

Environmental sustainability

https://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/strategy/kings-service-strategy.pdf
New Power Universities must serve society more broadly, which means serving the SDGs

“A university that is committed to … working for mutual benefit with its communities … will have to shift its management and governance from one that values currency, to one that channels the current. … [T]his could include accreditation to pay the Living Wage or insourcing cleaning and security contracts[.] … This is not an easy “ask” for institutions as traditional and rule-based as universities have often been but, in our opinion, it’s an inevitable consequence of adopting a service agenda as part of the core academic mission”.

Deborah Bull and Jonathan Grant, Wonkhe Blog, 2019

Developing different approaches to measure the social purpose of universities

- To measure and recognise university engagement, representatives of the King's College London, the University of Chicago and the University of Melbourne have worked with Nous Group to map out a path forward.

- We developed a theory of change, which explained how the proposed indicators encouraged the desired behaviours, and conducted pilot studies with universities from North America, Asia, Latin America, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, to test and refine the behaviours and indicators.

- The outcome is a framework to measure and rank engagement around the world. The framework distils university engagement down to eight engagement indicators.

- The framework is simple, applicable to multiple types of universities, can be linked to global league tables, and is linked to a theory of long-term behaviour change.

https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/advancing-university-engagement.pdf
King’s came 9th in the world for social impact in 2020

- King’s came 9th in the world in the *Times Higher Education (THE)* Impact Rankings 2020 compared to 5th in 2019. We were also 2nd in the UK and 3rd in Europe.

- Evidence is gathered from across the whole of King’s.

- 766 universities took part this time (compared to 450 last year) from 89 countries.

- King’s top scoring SDGs for the 2020 ranking are:
  - Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3)
  - Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11)
  - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)
  - Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17)
It is first and foremost about social purpose ....

Jonathan Grant, vice-president (service) at King's College London, said that the institution has not organised its strategy around the SDGs, but it does report against them as a way of demonstrating progress, partly prompted by the THE University Impact Rankings.

Professor Grant added that universities have “failed” to demonstrate their social purpose “for quite a long time now” but the SDGs could provide some institutions with “a useful framework” for improving in this area.

However, he said mandating that universities embrace the SDGs “would be a mistake”.

“We should welcome [the SDGs] and use them where appropriate. But at the same time, I don't think that's a substitute for really thinking about your vision and your strategy and delivering your social purpose as a university,” he said. “I [would] worry if it becomes a tick-box exercise.”
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