

2019 Annual Gladwyn Lecture

Building Inclusive Communities in the Commonwealth: A New Role for Universities

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6:00 p.m.

Thursday, December 5, 2019

CPA Room, Palace of Westminster



Check Against Delivery

1. *Greetings and introduction*

Good evening, everyone. Bonjour and Bhoozho.

Allow me first to thank the Council for Education in the Commonwealth for hosting me this evening. It is an honour to follow in the footsteps of the previous Gladwyn Lecturers and I can only hope to approximate the insight offered by those who have spoken before me.

I have chosen to speak to you this evening about a topic that has become central to my work as a university president: How can higher education institutions play a constructive role in building more inclusive communities?

We are accustomed to thinking about universities as agents of social mobility. For generations, a university degree has represented a pathway into the middle class for many and for some an escape from inter-generational poverty.

For that reason, people have flocked to higher education. In just a little over 20 years, the average tertiary education attainment in the OECD has increased from 24 per cent to 44 per cent. In the same period, attainment rose from 25 per cent to 51 per cent in the UK and from 44 per cent to 61 per cent in Canada.¹

Some caution should be used when interpreting the Canadian data, as much of our comparative success is due to our high performance in non-university higher education through our vocational colleges.

But any way you count it, the dramatic rise in tertiary attainment across the OECD and throughout the Commonwealth is rightly seen as a victory for public policy. There is widespread demand for higher learning and our governments and educational institutions have risen to meet it, often in times of constrained public spending.

So, mission accomplished? Do universities continue to offer a clear path to financial security and engaged citizenship?

As we know, pronouncements of “mission accomplished” - whether made by the President of the United States on the deck of an aircraft carrier or a university president to a room of politicians and civil servants - have a way of becoming ironic hindsight condemnations of over-confident leaders, tragically secure in their beliefs and steps from hurtling over a precipice.ⁱⁱ

I do not need to remind anyone in this room that we live in an era where old certainties are falling away in the face of technological disruption, economic turmoil and political chaos. Beginning with the financial crisis of 2008, citizens have begun to question the efficacy of the political, economic and educational institutions meant to serve them. Amid tropes like the “Barista with a BA,” young people and society at large have begun to question how effective universities actually are at preparing graduates for success in the workforce and, by extension, building societies where the fruits of economic growth are widely shared.

My purpose here today is to argue that universities continue to play an important role in building more inclusive communities. However, if universities are to continue being agents of social mobility, they must radically rethink how they teach, who they teach and what relationship they wish to have with the communities they serve - both locally and around the world. In short, universities must reimagine themselves to meet the demands of an uncertain and dynamic reality.

My focus this evening is to sketch the dimensions of this new role.

2. Problem definition – the challenges to inclusivity

Let me begin like any good academic, by defining my terms. By “inclusive,” I mean two things: First, a community where all members share in the economic prosperity generated by the community. This does not mean absolute equality, where everyone receives the same share of economic growth. Rather, the principle is that if an economy grows, the benefits should be widely shared. Some may benefit more, some less, but this gap should not be enormous and no one should be left out.

Second, inclusivity means that everyone, regardless of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation, should be able to participate in the social, cultural and political life of their community. These two definitions are related— full participation in society is not possible if one is cut off from the resources needed to engage with their fellow citizens. For many equity-seeking groups, exclusion from the benefits of economic growth means lives lived on the social and political margins. Likewise, if the barriers to full participation are removed, the community as a whole becomes more prosperous.

There is no question that humanity, and particularly the industrialized nations of the Global North, have made significant progress by both criteria. The quality of life in most nations is higher than it was a generation ago, although serious gaps remain between countries and regions.

Civil and human rights have also advanced, again with some troubling exceptions.

We are, as a species, wealthier and freer than we have ever been. And yet, for all this progress, it is difficult to escape the impression that we live in a deeply troubled world.

Despite massive increases in overall wealth, our societies are becoming more unequal. As documented by Thomas Piketty and others, after a long decline in the decades following the Second World War, income inequality began to spike in the 1980s and has reached levels not seen since the late nineteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ

These trends appear to apply across the Commonwealth. The pattern of growing inequality applies to Canada, the UK, Australia, India and South Africa, among other Commonwealth member states.

While the 2008 Financial Crisis was not caused by rising inequality, it did serve to highlight the growing unfairness of our economic system and placed income inequality at the centre of public policy debates.

It also fed a sense that the system was rigged against ordinary citizens and pushed fears of economic marginalization and social exclusion into the middle class. Once the bastion of social stability, the newly anxious middle has increasingly embraced polarized politics. The results of this dynamic are now well known here in the UK, the

United States and my home province of Ontario - anywhere where populism has taken hold in the political sphere.

At the same time, economic dislocation and eroding confidence in public institutions is fueling renewed racial and religious tensions around the world. Add in the damaging and destabilizing economic and human impacts of climate change and the future begins to look like it will be defined more by exclusion than inclusion.

We need new tools to fix these problems.

3. *The traditional role of universities in building inclusivity*

For many decades, our existing tools were highly effective.

The decades-long decline in inequality beginning in the 1940s was no accident. While it was not described in these terms, industrialized nations developed an ingenious post-war response to the problem of building inclusive communities.

We called it the welfare state. The idea that everyone, by virtue of their status as citizens, should be guaranteed economic security and equality of opportunity. This was not the only reason why inequality declined and prosperity increased- the postwar economic boom also shares the credit. But it is difficult to escape the fact that increased inclusion and the widespread sharing of economic benefits owes much to the structures that evolved from the idea that the state had a big role to play in ensuring the equality, economic security and wellbeing of its citizens.

As I stand here in "the mother of all parliaments," I find it appropriate that I should also recognize the system of programs that, in many ways, became "the mother of all welfare states." In 1942, William Beveridge released his plan to combat the "five giants" plaguing British society - Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. His report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, became the blueprint for a conception of social citizenship that has been both celebrated and criticized over the past 77 years.

It is telling that "Ignorance" was included in his list of great social evils. Its counterforce - education - was therefore part of the British welfare state from the very beginning. Following the Robbins Report in 1963, access to higher education was enshrined as a key tool for ensuring social mobility. This has meant different things to different governments, but the Robbins Principle - that university places should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment - has become central to higher education policy not only in the UK but around the Commonwealth.^{iv} The notion that university participation should be based on the ability to learn rather than the ability to pay is as familiar to a Canadian as it is to a South African student protesting against rising tuition fees, as they did dramatically in 2015.

The application of the Robbins Principle and its national variants helps to explain the dramatic increase in university attendance that I have already outlined. This is the basis of what I will call the post-war higher education consensus between politicians, civil servants and university leaders: To unlock the power of higher education to build social mobility and inclusion, the goal of public policy was to simply increase the number of spaces and to reduce financial barriers, through some combination of tuition fee subsidies and student financial assistance.

My intent is not to criticize this policy framework; indeed, I am a beneficiary of it, as I am sure many of you are as well. Rather, I wish to suggest that if higher education is to continue being an agent of social inclusion in an age of disruption and anxiety, then we must move beyond the access paradigm. The old tools can continue to play a role, but we need to augment them with new ones.

In addition to the rising tide of inequality, social disruption is being driven by technological change. The economic effects of artificial intelligence and automation have become the focus of much political concern. It is fair to say that some of this anxiety may be overblown, as it is notoriously difficult to predict accurately who will be affected by automation, and how. Some of the figures circulating today are alarmist. But even the modest predictions should be enough to give us pause.

Here in the UK, the Office of National Statistics has estimated that 7.4 per cent of jobs are at high risk of automation, while over 60 per cent are at medium risk. A little over

seven per cent does not seem like much, but it represents 1.5 million workers. If just a fraction of the medium risk jobs are also automated, millions more could be displaced.^v

A 2017 study found that around 46 per cent of all *work activities* across Canada could be automated, affecting some 7.7 million workers. This analysis is interesting because it takes work tasks as the unit of analysis rather than entire occupations. It therefore provides a more nuanced view of the potential impacts of technology on the workforce - jobs may not be automated out of existence, but they may be significantly transformed. Workers occupying these roles will need to acquire new skills - and fast - to adapt.^{vi}

Another worrying trend is the fact that automation will disproportionately affect industries and occupations where women are currently over-represented. This may exacerbate existing wage and employment inequities between men and women.

At the same time, the rate of technological innovation means that the new jobs created in the global knowledge economy will be high-skilled, requiring some form of postsecondary education. Estimates in Canada, for example, suggest that 70 per cent of future careers will require a tertiary credential from a university or community college.^{vii} Universities can only continue to be drivers of social inclusion if they prepare students to be successful in a high-skilled, highly competitive global workforce.

So, as political and educational leaders, if we care about building inclusive communities and reducing inequality, we need to think not just about getting more people into higher education. We need to think about how we ensure those students acquire the knowledge, skills and experience that will allow them and their societies to thrive. Think of this as the moral imperative deriving from increasing university attendance through access policies: we got them through the door, so we should have a plan for getting them out and into a meaningful career.

4. *The new role for universities*

This responsibility is at the heart of what I think of as the new role for universities in building greater inclusivity. The first component of this new role is changing *how* we teach.

It is increasingly clear to me that the most significant pedagogical innovation of the past generation is experiential learning. Including co-operative education, internships, service learning and a host of other programs, the defining characteristic of experiential learning is an integration of an academic program with workplace experience. This allows students to complement the theoretical with the practical, aligning their abilities with the needs of employers. They build networks and relationships that will help them succeed beyond their university degree.

At my institution, we recently entered into an innovative partnership with Shopify, the Canadian-bred e-commerce leader. Called *Dev Degree*, this program embeds our students in the company's development teams through a paid internship. Students split their time between Shopify's offices in downtown Toronto and their coursework at our Lassonde School of Engineering, earning a unique honours Bachelor of Computer Science degree.

There are hundreds of examples I could cite of Commonwealth universities building experiential learning into their curricula. The point is that forging an explicit link between higher education, career-focused skills and employment will help make real the promise of social mobility made by modern universities. Economic participation is a prerequisite for social inclusion, so the more we can do to ensure the career success of graduates, the stronger we make the communities in which they live.

We also need to reimagine *who* we teach.

Although I could point to periods when some attention has been paid to the "mature learner," for decades, universities for the most part have focused on teaching a specific cohort: 18-24-year-olds. To build social mobility and inclusion in the modern context, we need to expand our vision. Lifelong learning needs to move from the periphery of the university to the core.

In one sense, this is an expansion of the traditional focus on access. As demonstrated by the UK's Open University - a success story celebrating its 50th birthday this year - there are a variety of benefits of extending higher learning to students from non-traditional backgrounds. By offering more flexible learning options like online learning,

mature students, students with dependents, students with disabilities and lower-income individuals can all benefit from a university education.

But lifelong learning also speaks to potential for universities to help mitigate the dislocating effects of technological change. As existing occupations are disrupted and new ones are created, there will be an increasing need for workers to re-skill and up-skill quickly throughout their careers. To help them do this, universities will need to create new programs and credentials geared to the needs of employers. Short-cycle programs leading to the acquisition of a particular skill or competency - more fashionably known as micro-credentials - are one such way of meeting the emerging need for re-training.

These micro-credentials can also be ladderred. One skill-based credential can be combined with others to meet the requirements of a certificate; a certificate can be augmented to earn a degree, and so on. Laddering allows students to jump into and out of higher educations as needed, acquiring targeted credentials that are easily understood by prospective employers.

Developing ladderred credentials requires universities to move beyond existing models of teaching and learning and to create new internal labour and administrative structures that provide the requisite organizational flexibility. These are not easy changes, but they are necessary.

And I do not mean to suggest that all vestiges of the historical university should be discarded. The 18-24-year-old cohort will continue to be important, as will the campus-based educational experience that appeals to these individuals. The liberal arts and humanities can and must continue to hold a central plan in the postsecondary enterprise, both for their intrinsic value and their ability to enrich the communicative, analytical and problem-solving skills valued by employers. I am arguing here for a much broader conception of higher education, not a narrow vocational one.

I have so far been discussing the internal changes that universities must make to contend with changing needs and expectations. But the final dimension of the

inclusivity-building role has to do with how universities relate to communities beyond the campus.

Our society faces serious challenges. I have already discussed rising inequality, social conflict and technological disruption. To that list we might also add the climate emergency. Indeed, climate change is likely the most significant threat to our collective survival as a species.

These challenges are complex and beyond the scope of any single actor to address - not government, industry, NGOs or universities. To develop innovative solutions, we need to work across sectors and across borders.

An example of the power of cross-sector collaboration comes from the city of Medellin, Colombia. Once dubbed "the most dangerous city in the world" by Time magazine, it is now a centre for culture and entrepreneurship. In the six years between 2002 and 2008, poverty fell by nearly 23 per cent. How did they do it? By working together.

The first step was building a massive new public transportation system - the Metro - that unlocked the city for its inhabitants. New public spaces were created - parks, libraries and even libraries in parks. The city invested in research, leveraging the strength of the 30 universities located within its borders. Once riven by violence unleashed by the drug cartels, it is today cosmopolitan and vibrant.

The city government could not have accomplished this feat on its own. Officials needed to build partnerships with civil society groups, educational institutions and the private sector to regenerate their infrastructure and civic life. Partnerships were the key to this incredible transformation.

I believe that universities are uniquely positioned as hubs that can facilitate this kind of collaboration. York University, my institution, is in the early days of embracing this role, but already the progress is encouraging. We have launched a partnership between multiple levels of government, community organizations, the private sector and Indigenous peoples to tackle the problem of youth homelessness, moving from a reactive crisis approach to strategies based on prevention.

We are working with the City of Vaughan, IBM's VentureLab and a large local hospital to explore the creation of a new multi-use health precinct, potentially combining learning and research space with commercialization and patient care facilities.

We are currently in discussions with the UN on establishing a CIFAL training centre at York, the first of its kind in Canada.

York now also considers itself an anchor institution within its surrounding community, putting engagement and local benefits at the heart of our operations, from procurement to hiring to capital expansion. These partnerships also form the foundation of experiential learning which are mutually beneficial for students and communities.

Multi-sector collaboration allows us to expand the reach and efficacy of our impact. This year, we were ranked 5th in Canada and 26th in world in the inaugural Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, measuring the contribution of universities towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

I apologize for this brief bout of self-congratulation, but I hope these examples demonstrate the potential benefits of restructuring the relationship between universities and external partners. To build inclusive communities, the university must be *in* the community, working for positive social, political, economic and environmental change.

5. How can government and policymakers support this new role?

I hope the dimensions of the new role for universities - a change in pedagogy, a broadening of the educational enterprise and a commitment to multi-sector collaboration to tackle serious societal challenges - are now clear. But since we are here today in a house of government, it is perhaps reasonable to ask what role Commonwealth governments can play in supporting universities as they shift and expand their focus.

First, there is no denying that governments have a unique ability to marshal public resources to support public goods. Greater social inclusion certainly falls in this category.

Experiential learning imposes additional costs on the university, costs that are seldom recognized in existing funding models. New funds to support the expansion of work-integrated learning would be appreciated by both institutions and their students, the value of which cannot be overstated at a time when the future skills gap is such a dominant concern.

Existing funding models are also geared around traditional credentials. Funding a student for a full year of study in a recognized degree program works well now, but does not offer the flexibility a university would require to offer micro- and laddered credentials to non-traditional students who may only have a few weeks at a time to spend in an educational program. I hope governments will work closely with institutions to develop new funding and regulatory arrangements that will support innovation in lifelong learning.

Finally, governments will continue to have an indispensable role in facilitating access to higher education through financial assistance and programs designed to encourage greater participation in higher learning. Whereas government access policy has focused on the traditional 18-24 cohort, new incentives and financial supports will be required to assist lifelong learners in search of re-skilling opportunities.

The Government of Canada recently introduced the Lifelong Learning Plan, which allows learners to withdraw funds from their Registered Retirement Savings Plan to pay for skills and job training. This is admittedly a modest first step, but an encouraging sign that Canada is recognizing the growing importance of mid-career training.

A more aggressive program would be the establishment of a true training bank, where employees can accrue either time-off or money to support retraining activities, matched in kind by the government and their employer.

In any case, just as universities must broaden who they serve and how, governments must be partners in supporting a more diverse community of learners.

6. Closing

By way of closing, allow me to offer a personal reflection. I grew up in the Canadian Prairies, in a working-class home in the city of Winnipeg. Neither of my parents were fortunate enough to go to university- an experience which has led me to university leadership, and indirectly, to the CPA room in the Palace of Westminster, delivering a talk in which you have kindly indulged me this evening.

I know how universities can transform lives and communities. The benefits I have enjoyed were generated under one set of economic realities and through a particular conception of what a university education was and who it was for. I believe that we can renew the transformative power of higher education in a very different context by rethinking how we teach and who we teach, while restructuring our relationship with communities we serve. By adapting to current and future demands, we can give graduates the economic and social capital they need to fully engage in the lives of their neighbourhoods, their nations and their world. We can, in short, stake out a new role for universities in creating inclusive communities across the Commonwealth.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak with you today. I look forward to answering your questions.

Merci. Miigwech.

ⁱ <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm>.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mission_Accomplished_speech

ⁱⁱⁱ Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. For a useful summary of major trends outlined in the book, please see <https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/piketlys-inequality-story-in-six-charts>.

^{iv} The notion of the Robbins Principle is well established in the literature. For a useful summary, please see: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/remembering-robbins/>

^v <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/theprobabilityofautomationinengland/2011and2017>

^{vi} https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/RP_BrookfieldInstitute_Automation-Across-the-Nation.pdf

^{vii} This figure is widely quoted in academic, government and industry (i.e. RBC) documents. It originated in a 2004 HRDC Paper, *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/RH64-13-2002E.pdf>