

A Secular Democracy does not need Universities (0016)

This presentation looks at the rationale that has developed for the function of universities, starting from their original function in the thirteenth century, of providing protection for the freedom of expression for individuals in a society that was generally hostile to the free expression of critical ideas. This original idea has then become overlaid with related concepts over time, including the university as arbiter of true scholarship, the creator of new knowledge, the provider of professional education, and the marketplace for ideas in the knowledge economy. In parallel to these changes in the university, society has developed other institutions, often modelled on the university, which can perform each of those functions: the private limited company, the free press, the research and development divisions of corporations, private training providers and the Internet.

By examining the assumptions that underpin the understanding of each of those supposed roles for the university, this paper will examine the extent to which each of these functions can be served by these alternative institutions, and therefore what is a sensible way of addressing the future functions of the university. In conclusion it will be stressed that this is not the universities' problem. As discussion of the changing roles of the university will make clear, universities take the form that they do now because they have responded positively to the demands of society; the universities that we have now are institutions that are the product of government policy (albeit disconnected and often contradictory policy). What the universities can become is therefore society's problem, and government policy needs to address the question of which functions are required of universities, and how policies can ensure that universities can grow to meet those requirements.