

Conference on Conceptualising a Christian University in the UK

Group Discussions – Saturday 12th September 2015

Group 1 – Unpacking the “global multiversity” and the place of liberal arts

The previous video talk, “Engaging the secular University” delivered by Julian Rivers was a starting point for the discussion, where it began with coverage of the place of liberal arts in the University both traditionally and now as a small part within the modern “global multiversity”. The age of tuition fees is a game changer in higher education in the UK, which makes a difference to the US model that can adopt liberal arts within a four year degree, considered too expensive in Britain. It was asked whether a liberal arts model could be incorporated into three year UK programmes. The question of benefit in doing this was asked in terms of what do we educate for? The answer was for leadership and civilisation, rather than just vocation. Modern degrees have focus on training in vocation and employability yet the importance of value to employability with regard to leadership and civilisation is highly important and could add a new important dimension to UK education.

Some programmes in the UK in Universities that did have a background including liberal arts were found to be still including them as a minor study to complement their major line of study. In a modern context it was seen that there is as much importance taking sciences (including social, physical and biological sciences) and liberal arts as necessary to complement each other. Furthermore it was identified that outside of this grouping was the more modern element of information communication and technology. Similar to Christian schools this would embrace a framework of meaningfulness integrated in an academic community. This is particular importance in embracing diversity to go against the worry that a Christian University could form a holy huddle but rather that those entering it not from such a background thrive considerably more than they would do in a secular University. The clear aim is to be engagement and exposure rather than isolation.

Group 2 – Structures of a Christian University

Four broad topics were covered within this session:

1. What is the motivation/driver for a Christian University?
2. What form would it take?
3. How would we measure success?
4. Are there biblical principles that can be adopted?

The first point was in short that a Christian University is about mission. Second to that there is a need for staff accountability in the context of learning. This is challenging to achieve if Christian staff are drawn in for varied and short contributions, as already happens in some overseas locations.

In addressing the form of the Christian University, would there be people appointed to fulfil the worship and spiritual tasks? Could we collaborate worldwide over the Internet to get academics who are otherwise physically not in the right place to serve in a Christian University? Could it be a low-profile accrediting body that could enable other Christian courses across the country to continue to function as accredited courses? Could we have godly benefactors to support funding? Could there be a learning community with tutors present at weekends, to share their lives and thinking with their students at such a time? Could there be a research body of academics that would bring together people from different disciplines? How explicit should a statement of faith be, for staff and also students?

In addressing good measures of success, one way to do this is the evidence of student written reflection at the time of graduation. Another measure is how much society and public perceptions of the Christian university are steadily changed due to the societal impact of the graduates. Another measure is the success (or otherwise) of students in their vocational callings.

The need for biblical principles led to discussion of concepts of building and protection, similar to Nehemiah 11 on the wall building. In that chapter, people voluntarily came in and populated Jerusalem, just as Christian academics could help populate a university on a part-time basis. We need to draw in Christian academics to share and impart into it. Ephesians 4:11 (where God gave to the church apostles, prophets, teachers, etc.) encouraged the thought that staff should be employed and kept serving (only) within their gifting of excellence. The scriptures give ample record of one generation imparting learning and godliness to another. The discipling methods of Jesus are also a model to follow.

Group 3 – Interdependence of disciplines in a Christian University

Each discipline is a messy composite thing, with competing paradigms. One characteristic is that abstraction is going on and we can't have full autonomy in one discipline. Despite encouragement from funding bodies, there is a real resistance to doing (and reporting) proper interdisciplinary research. Skills need to be learned for constructive engagement!

The main question concerned a possible cornerstone subject: probably either theology or philosophy (*NB* materialists might want it to be physics or maths!). Some consensus emerged that a combination of the two, rooted in biblical studies, would be desirable. There was some discussion of the types or strands of philosophy and theology that could usefully contribute to all subjects: we need systematic frameworks and concepts that cut across disciplines. Epistemology is clearly important (it was deplored how little of this features in the typical PhD thesis). Biblical theology needs some kind of systematising in order to serve other disciplines. And there are useful concepts from class theory, thing theory and modal theory that emphasise the diversity of aspects of things that are studied across disciplines.