

from *Invisible Universities*



Philip Terry

Hidden Universities (1)

Behind its unassuming, modest, almost self-effacing name, Smith College – though the staff who work there and the students they teach almost invariably refer to it as “Smith” – boasts a formidable reputation. Ten years ago nobody had heard of it, and if a student had put Smith on their UCAS form, it would have been assumed that they had put their name in the wrong place. Today Smith consistently lands at the top of the university League Tables. Whether you consult The Good University Guide, The Times, or The Guardian, Smith is always jostling for the top spot, and when students dream of going to university, it is not of Oxbridge that they dream, but of Smith.

Whether it is for Employability, Good Degrees, Wellbeing, Added Value or Diversity, Smith always does well. Student Satisfaction at Smith – one of the most important KPIs – is never less than 100%, which makes you wonder why students ever leave. And, indeed, many prolong their stay as long as possible, as Marketing are quick to point out, extending it with a year abroad option, or staying on for an MA or a PhD. And many students, even once they

have graduated, find their first jobs at Smith in the ever-expanding Communications Suite, which now occupies a whole parallel campus situated beside the main university site.

Yet even at Smith, not everyone is content. Academics, who in former years spent their summers in villas in the south of France, reading and thinking, now spend the majority of the summer months in intensive workshops where coders deconstruct the algorithms that feed the League Tables, so that teachers are in a better position to ensure that their actions are translated into the data that will best represent their institution. It is these methods which are the key to Smiths' meteoric rise in fame. It is thanks to them, and to some creative accounting, that Smith has been able to triple its spend per student without actually altering its financial practices; it is thanks to them that students at Smith never have to wait more than ten working days before they receive feedback on their work; and it is thanks to them that without fail students at Smith have a knowledge of assessment criteria that is so detailed and advanced that it sometimes rivals their knowledge of their subject itself.

And yet, beneath the dazzling and enviable Smith that is reflected in the League Tables, there is another Smith, the Smith as it exists on the ground. Here the lifts that take students up to the lecture theatres are constantly malfunctioning; the ducks on the lake of the prize-winning *green campus* are suffering from a wasting disease which slowly denudes them of feathers; the Wi-fi in the student blocks is intermittent; there is a waiting list of four weeks if you want to see your personal tutor or a wellbeing officer; a noxious and indefinable smell exudes daily from the pipes and the chimneys which supply the catering block, where food poisoning is common. This is the university that the new students at Smith find themselves at when the fanfare of Freshers' Week fades. They pinch themselves, asking is this really Smith? The long faces that gather round the lake at dusk all tell the same story: you'd better get used to it, this is what it's like behind the lie of the marketing, the university spends so much on this that there is nothing left to spend on anything else.

Universities and Names (5)

In the University of Exiles, to establish the relationships that sustain the university's life, the students get to know each other by sitting down in a circle and throwing a ball of wool around. When you receive the ball you say your name, your favourite colour, the name of the city you would like to inhabit, or something similar, then you throw the ball on. The result is a spider web of rich and tangled wool that links each of the new students to every other student in the ring. Later on the students stretch strings from the corners of the accommodation blocks, white or black, or green or red, according to whether they mark a relationship of friendship, grief, hope or blood. When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the students leave: the accommodation blocks and the lecture theatres are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain.

From a mountainside, camping with their household goods, the refugees from the University of Exile look at the labyrinth of taught strings and poles that rise in the plain. That is the University of Exiles still, they say, and they are nothing.

They rebuild the University of Exiles elsewhere. They weave a similar pattern of strings which they would like to be more complex and at the same time more regular than the other, introducing new colours of string, abandoning others. Then they abandon it and take themselves and their possessions still farther away.

Thus, when traveling in the footsteps of the students, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned universities without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spiderwebs of intricate relationships seeking a form.

Hidden Universities (2)

In Ferris University, life is not happy. Lecturers wring their hands as they drag themselves towards the lecture theatres to deliver talks on subjects that no longer interest them. Students who have long forgotten why they ever came here lean on the railings by the river and press their fists into their temples. In the morning you wake from

one bad dream and another begins almost at once. At the computer where, every time you try to log on, an icon pops up denying you access to your account, or in your digs, where the party upstairs is still going on when you wake up after a fitful night's sleep, or at the supermarket, where your debit card is rejected for the third time that week, or at the bar where instead of going to lectures students sit in front of rows of empty beer glasses, their bent heads at least concealing their miserable faces. At night it is worse, and you don't need to step on campus to know this: just turn on the news and you will hear about the brawls and the stabbings and the drug deals and the suicides that take place there on an almost daily basis.

And yet, in Ferris, at every moment there is a student in a window who laughs on seeing the campus cat that has jumped on a bikeshed to bite into a piece of cake dropped by a builder who has shouted from the top of the scaffolding, "Mine's the burger, I'll be right down," to a young cyclist working for Deliveroo, who's next stop is the second-hand bookseller on the market square, who is celebrating a good morning's sales, among them a copy of *Women in Love* bought by a studious undergraduate who thinks mistakenly that it will tell her what she should do about the bearded young mathematician she has met in the library with whom she is in love, happy man, and still happier the nightingale he hears singing in the nearby copse as for a moment he looks up from his sums, before rising from his seat and making his way to a nearby bookshelf to consult a volume of philosophy, where the writer states: "Also in Ferris, university of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy university contains a happy university unaware of its own existence."

Universities and the Sky (5)

The University of the Moon was built so artfully that its every street and corridor follows a planet's orbit, and the buildings and places of community life repeat the order of the constellations and the position of the most luminous stars: Antares, Alpheratz, Capricorn, the Cepheids. The university's calendar is so regulated that lectures and

exams and degree ceremonies are arranged in a map corresponding to the firmament on that date: and thus the days on the moon and the nights in the sky reflect one another.

Though it is painstakingly regulated, the university's life flows calmly like the motion of the celestial bodies and it acquires the inevitability of phenomena not subject to human caprice. In praising the students on the University of the Moon for their productivity and spiritual ease (not least their mastery of the habit of reading upside-down in the zero gravity study booths) I was led to say: I can well understand how, feeling yourselves part of an unchanging heaven, cogs in a meticulous network, you take care not to make the slightest change in your university or your habits. The University of the Moon is the only university I know where it is best to remain motionless in time.

They looked at one another dumbfounded. "But why? Whoever put such an idea in your head?" And they led me to visit a suspended street recently opened over a bamboo grove, a shadow-theatre recently constructed where once there had been a moon crater, an exercise park which had been built where once there was a quarantine centre for new arrivals. "And these innovations do not disturb your university's astral rhythms?" I asked. "Our university and the heavens correspond so perfectly," they answered, "that any change in the University of the Moon involves some novelty among the stars." The astronomers, after each change that takes place in the university, peer into their telescopes and report a nova's explosion, or a remote point in the firmament's change of colour from orange to yellow, the expansion of a nebula, the bending of a spiral of the Milky Way. Each change implies a sequence of other changes, in the University of the Moon as among the stars: the university and the sky never remain the same.

As for the character of the students who study at the University of the Moon, which is shared, of course, by the university's senior managers, two virtues are worth mentioning: self-confidence and prudence. Convinced that every innovation in the university influences the sky's pattern, before taking any decision they calculate the risks and advantages, and any potential disadvantages, for

themselves and for the university and for all worlds.

Hidden Universities (5)

I should not tell you of Camford, the unjust university, which crowns with triglyphs, abaci, and metopes the class privilege which it shamelessly props up and perpetuates (the low-paid women assigned to polishing shoes and cleaning, when they raise their chins over the ornate balustrades and contemplate the atria, stairways, and porticos, feel even more imprisoned and short of stature). Instead, I should tell you of the hidden Camford, the university of the just, where behind closed doors in shadowy rooms banned books are passed from hand to hand, and plots to remove the powerful from office are hatched beneath winding staircases, and secret messages are passed on via a network of wires and pipes and pulleys and pistons and counterweights that penetrate the student quarters like a climbing plant. Instead of describing to you the cloistered swimming pools where the unjust of Camford bathe naked, and the common rooms hung with famous paintings where they recline and weave their intrigues with rotund eloquence and observe with a proprietary eye the plump flesh of the new students as they pass by, I should tell you how the just, always cautious to evade the eyes of the spying sycophant and the overzealous porter at the gatehouse, recognize one another by their way of speaking, especially their pronunciation of commas and parentheses; from their habits which remain austere and innocent, avoiding complicated and nervous moods; from their sober but delicious cuisine, which evokes an ancient Golden Age: rice and celery soup, boiled beans and samphire, fried squash flowers.

From these data it is possible to deduce an image of the future Camford, which will bring you closer to knowing the truth than any other information about the university as it is seen today. You must nevertheless bear in mind what I am about to say to you: in the seed of the city of the just, a malignant seed is hidden, in its turn: the certainty and pride of being in the right – and of being more just than many others who call themselves more just than the just. This seed ferments in bitterness, rivalry, resentment; and the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is coloured by a yearning to be in their place

and to act as they do. Another unjust university, though different from the first, is digging out its space within the double sheath of the unjust and just Camford.

Having said this, I don't want you to get the wrong idea, so I must draw your attention to an intrinsic quality of this unjust university germinating secretly inside the secret just university: and this is the possible awakening – as if in an excited opening of windows – of a later love for justice, not yet subjected to rules, capable of reassembling a university still more just than it was before it became the vessel of injustice. But if you peer deeper into this new germ of justice you can discern a tiny spot that is spreading like the mounting tendency to impose what is just through what is unjust, and perhaps this is the germ of an immense campus city...

From my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Camford is a temporal succession of different universities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you about is something else: all the future Camfords are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.

Universities and Image (1)

All universities like to boast of their own special features, the distinguishing characteristics that set them apart from rival institutions, their unique selling points, but in Fulke College branding has been taken to the point where it has become a fine art. It is not just the letterheads and the university logo and the merchandise that are branded at Fulke, but the university "attitude" (one of boldness), the color scheme of the website (daringly close to garish but stopping just short of bad taste), and the walk (brisk and purposeful without ever appearing hurried). Fulke, too, can boast of being the only university where smiles must be on brand – showing white teeth and exuding contentment and zest for the institutional vision – and all staff from the cleaners to the librarians to the lecturers to Professional Services (a brand term to describe all varieties of clerical work) are required to take an online course of instruction to ensure that their own smile falls within brand parameters.

The continued expansion and refinement of the brand has not been without its problems and even controversies. The university motto, which for many years had been a Latin tag meaning something along the lines of “Knowledge conquers all”, was quickly brought into question by the core leadership team when a survey brought to light the fact that nobody, from the most recent recruit in Marketing to the Vice-Chancellor, had a clue what it meant. But what should they change it to? A fierce battle between traditionalists and modernizers ensued which quickly reached deadlock before the Student Voice was consulted and it was decided to hold a competition. The unanimous winner was “We are Fulke, get over it!”

Is Fulke a happy university? It depends who you ask. Those in branding point to Fulke's outstanding scores in wellbeing surveys, to the new Mental Health policy recently ratified by Senate, and to the establishment of the new Quality of Life centre, run in collaboration with a nationwide consortium of health experts. Fulke, they maintain, is a sector leader. But the unions, who for years have been embroiled in long drawn-out negotiations with management, point to less felicitous aspects of the university's obsession with branding. Branding, they maintain, is a technology of the slave trade and its methods are those of subjection. In particular, they point to the case of Professor Corless-Smith, who the university tried to expel for an off-brand smile at the end of a planning meeting. The case has attracted widespread attention, touching, as it does, not just on academic freedom, but on the most basic freedoms and human rights of all employees. A petition, signed by over 40,000 hands, and counting, seems likely to cause a managerial u-turn.

Universities and Signs (3)

The student who goes through clearing and does not yet know the university awaiting her in September wonders what the campus will be like, the accommodation, the cafés, the club, the lecture theatre, the library, the sports building, the theatre, the SU bar, the shops. In every university in the land every building is different and laid out in a different order: but as soon as the fresher arrives at the unknown university and her eye penetrates the labyrinth of buildings and walkways and squares, following the scrawl of chalk

messages written on the steps, the flashing electronic billboards, piles of rubbish heaped up in a corner, the smell of jerk chicken, she immediately distinguishes which is the Arts Building, the Science Building, the Vice-Chancellor's office, the bars, the VIP flats and the budget accommodation. This – some say – confirms the hypothesis that each woman bears in her mind a university made only of differences, a university without figures and without form, and the individual university fills it up.

This is not true of Borough Campus. In every building of this university you can, in turn, sleep, eat, attend a seminar, listen to the Vice-Chancellor's welcome speech, go to the theatre, carry out research, or drink yourself under the table. Any one of its pyramid roofs could cover the sports building, the theatre, or the underground car park. The freshman roams all around and has nothing but doubts: she is unable to distinguish the features of the university, the features she keeps distinct in her mind also mingle. She infers this: if existence in all its moments is all of itself, Borough is the place of indivisible existence. But why would you want to come and study here? What line separates the inside from the outside, the new student from the security guard, the starred first from the outright fail?