

VISION FOR A FREE UNIVERSITY

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Freedom is usually thought of as freedom *from* something – but freedom is also freedom *for*. The two belong together. We can't understand Steiner's insistence that tertiary education must be free from the state unless we value what a truly free education is *for*, what it can give birth to in the lives of young people.

What is said here relates to the Australian situation; different hindrances and different potentials will apply in other countries but there will be similarities. What is the same everywhere is the need for an anthroposophically-inspired university education to be free (not in the sense of gratis), so that it can help bring out the greatest in the young people of today and the future.

Universities pride themselves on their independence; academic freedom is their central ideal. What follows is part of the Magna Charta Universitatum, first signed in 1215 by 430 rectors of European universities and since by some 600 universities from all continents:

[T]he academic mission to meet the requirements and needs of the modern world and contemporary societies can be best performed when universities are morally and intellectually independent of all political or religious authority and economic power".¹

It would be difficult to find a more concise statement about the need to separate the three spheres of the social organism as Steiner conceived it. A university, as a central organ of the cultural-spiritual life, must not be impinged upon by either the state (the political-rights sphere) or the economic sphere.

However, in Australia, the federal government has claimed for itself the right to decide what is and what is not a university. Accredited universities can decide what and how they teach although they remain dependent on the government for research funding. If an educational institution is not a university then all its courses are regulated and controlled by the bureaucratic

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magna_Charta_Universitatum

accreditation process. There is no way a humble “institute” or “college” of adult education can be truly free in Australia if it wants to offer accredited courses.

The word “university” stands for a great deal in our cultural life. So much takes place in a university – in research and teaching – which relates to every dimension of life. These days a large percentage of school-leavers pass through university on their way to employment. A university should be both a melting pot of ideas and creative venturing and a source of social and spiritual transformation. It should serve as a radiant beacon of truth, beauty and goodness within the social whole.

In Australia the government exerts control of the use of the word “university” in a few different ways. If an educational institution is any kind of corporation, company, legal association – that is, if it is what is called a “regulated entity” – it must comply with the regulations.² It also controls whether an individual or organisation can use the word “university” or “uni” as part of an Internet domain name.³ Notwithstanding, we submit that this important word “university” actually belongs to humanity’s freedom-being.

A few years ago a few of us carried out a feasibility study for a free university in Australia, inspired mainly by anthroposophical insights; the first stage we named the Indus Project.⁴ It is founded upon Steiner’s vision of the threefold social order and, in relation to freedom, goes far beyond what is stated in the Magna Charta.

The vision of the Indus Project is to be separate from the state in terms of regulation of teaching content and methods and of finances. Does it plan to do this by means of some clever scheme to bypass governmental requirements? Not at all. The teaching and researching aspect of a university, which we are called “the faculty”, isn’t (or shouldn’t be) any kind of corporation or legal association. The teachers are not employees and it is not a money-making organisation because they are cultural-spiritual workers.

² See: <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/provider-registration/new-providers/before-applying-registration-higher-education-provider>

³ See: <https://www.education.gov.au/quality-and-legislative-frameworks/guidelines-use-word-university>

⁴ To view the Indus Project Feasibility Study, go to: <https://www.educationforsocialrenewalfoundation.com/>

What binds the teachers and researchers is an agreement they make with each other which is legally binding.

The faculty is not a corporation for reasons strictly to do with the threefold social outlook. A teacher does not offer a service or a good – in a lecture or seminar there is no economic *exchange*. Indeed, a lecturer or tutor may gain as much as the students in the process.⁵

Money will of course be involved in the Indus vision because teachers need to buy what they need to live, in order to be free to teach. Facilities need to be built and maintained. But no money will come from the government. Financial contribution from students will be of the nature of a *contracted contribution*; it is not a fee.⁶ Rather, it is gift money, with an expectation that a course will be run which the student has the right to attend. Other gift capital will come from free donations, from businesses or individuals.

Part the Indus vision is for a dedicated economic sphere which will also provide gift money. This would take the form of a biodynamic farm and associated businesses (for example, a bakery). All gift capital is free because it is only the faculty or legal-rights workers who decide on the use of this capital.

The campus is not the university – this is a key point. After all, the word “campus” means “a field” in Latin. This field, in the Indus vision, is extremely fertile and bountiful; it is a biodynamic farm which can flourish independently and self-sufficiently. The campus can accommodate the university through a legal agreement; it can be the situation where educational buildings can be erected and teaching can take place. However, the university is *only* the spiritual-cultural working together of teachers, researchers and students. It is a spiritual union of striving human individuals. Because the campus is a self-sufficient farm it means the university can grow in its own way and time – starting small and taking perhaps a decade, perhaps even a hundred years, to reach its full potential.

This leads to a second key point in the Indus vision of a free university. The university seeks to be authentic, to be true to itself, and not create itself merely in conformity with the usual social expectations of higher education.

⁵ See Michael Spence, *After Capitalism*, Adonis Press, 2014, p.89.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.128.

We *could* ask: will young people want to attend a university which offers no accredited degree? Rather, in the spirit of freedom, we ask: how can this university be brought in being so that it becomes a uniquely attractive situation, a lodestar for the spiritual yearning of the young people of today and tomorrow?

All of this, so far, has a lot to do with freedom *from*. But what about freedom *for* in the Indus vision? This relates to the experience of the students in lectures and seminars and, when the vision is fulfilled, in the architecture and general inspiring surroundings. Students won't be compelled by course-work which is tested by examinations, with degrees offered at the end. Everything will depend on students' free initiative, on the love for what they are doing or could do.

Lectures won't be intended to merely impart information; they will offer only great, inspiring vantage points on a subject. Students can research the course work, in their own way on the Internet or in relevant books. Seminars will mainly involve self-directed project work on the basis of Goethean-style phenomenology, with public presentations at the end of the year. The project and the presentation are both the test and the fruit of the course-work. Presentations can be attended by employers or staff from other tertiary institutions, if wished by the student. Every opportunity will be given for the students to realise themselves as free, responsible, creative human beings who have attained to some degree of spirit vision.

This gets to the heart of why this new form of university will not, and could not, proceed according to the old "vessel waiting to be filled" approach to tertiary teaching and learning. It has to do with freedom *for*. The aim of a course of study in the Indus vision is not to present a set of concepts, theories, facts, for the student to assimilate and be examined on. Here we can refer to an indication of Steiner given in one of the "university courses" in the last years of his life:

...*reading* is the goal of looking at phenomena. In other words, what I see as the essence of natural laws is already in the phenomena, in the same way that the meaning I discover when I read a word is already in the letters. If I remain within the phenomena, lovingly, and I do not attempt to impose some kind of hypothetical thought system on reality, then my

sense of science will be free to develop new concepts. This ability to remain free is what we need to establish.⁷

The students are learning to be free *for* the phenomena of the world so that the phenomena can be free to speak of who or what they are in truth. This is heart-knowing, knowing as caring, a Goethean-style phenomenology.

This is also the reason why we won't be splitting the students' studies into "vocational" and "non-vocational" (meaning a general studies or liberal arts curriculum which might involve the study of great classical works of literature and philosophy). In conventional universities the first is intended to guide students into the practicalities of social life (professions), the second into themselves as individuals in order to find their way to authenticity in conformity with inspiring thoughts and ideals coming from tradition. The Indus vision builds on the dictum of Goethe: "To know the world is to know the self". When we learn to know the world through a heart-thinking, we begin to live in the realm of creative freedom. The students learn, for example, to study the organs of a plant, or specific social phenomena, or architectural forms, or the symptoms of an illness, in such a way that they actually *experience* the freedom-nature of things and themselves. This is what we mean by "a degree of spirit vision".

In the last years of his life Steiner offered the world many indications towards a truly free form of university education. Now, hopefully, such indications can bear fruit.

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⁷ R. Steiner, *Reimagining Academic Studies*, SteinerBooks, 2015, p.12.