

PBS Admissions Test

The following text is a short extract from a 1950 essay by Michael Oakeshott, a former student and Fellow of Gonville and Caius College. Please read these pages and then compose, in your own words, a short summary of Oakeshott's view of what a university is. Keep your summary to not more than 400 words. Your account should be quite neutral: for the purposes of this test, we are not asking you to evaluate Oakeshott's position.

We hope you will find the passage interesting. In its use of gender and in other respects, it should, of course, be read as a document of its time.

The Idea of a University

Michael Oakeshott

It is a favourite theory of mine that what people call “ideals” and “purposes” are never themselves the source of human activity; they are shorthand expressions for the real spring of conduct, which is a disposition to do certain things and a knowledge of how to do them. Human beings do not start from rest and spring into activity only when attracted by a purpose to be achieved. To be alive is to be perpetually active. The purposes we attribute to particular kinds of activity are only abridgements of our knowledge of how to engage in this or that activity.

This, for example, is obviously so in the activity we call “science.” Scientific activity is not the pursuit of a premeditated end; nobody knows or can imagine where it will reach. There is no perfection, prefigured in our minds, which we can set up as a standard by which to judge current achievements. What holds science together and gives it impetus and direction is not a known purpose to be achieved, but the knowledge scientists have of how to conduct a scientific investigation. Their particular pursuits and purposes are not superimposed upon that knowledge, but emerge within it. Or again, a cook is not a man who first has the vision of a pie and then tries to make it; he is a man skilled in cookery, and both his projects and his achievements spring from his skill. Or, to take a third example, a man may think he has a “mission” in life, and he may think that his activity is governed by this “mission.” But, in fact, it is the other way about; his missionary activity consists in knowing how to behave in a certain way and in trying to behave in that way; and what he calls his “mission” is only a shorthand expression of this knowledge and endeavour.

For this reason, the current talk about the “mission” and the “function” of a university goes rather over my head; I think I can understand what is intended, but it seems to me an unfortunate way of talking. It assumes that there is something called “a university,” a contrivance of some sort, something you could make another of tomorrow if you had enough money, of which it is sensible to ask, What is it “for”? And one of the criticisms of contemporary universities is that they are not as clear as they ought to be about their “function.” I am not at all surprised. There is plenty that might properly be criticized in our universi-

Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) was professor of political science at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics. This essay first appeared in *The Listener* in 1950. It is reprinted here from *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, © 1989, ed. Timothy Fuller, with permission from Yale University Press.

ties, but to quarrel with them because they are not clear about their “function” is to make a mistake about their character. A university is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity. And it would be necessary for a university to advertise itself as pursuing a particular purpose only if it were talking to people so ignorant that they had to be spoken to in baby-language, or if it were so little confident of its power to embrace those who came to it that it had to call attention to its incidental charms. My impression, however, is that our universities have not yet sunk so low as to make this necessary. They may not know what they are “for,” they may be very hazy about their “function,” but I think they do know something that is much more important—namely, how to go about the business of being a university. This knowledge is not a gift of nature; it is a knowledge of a tradition, it has to be acquired, it is always mixed up with error and ignorance, and it may even be lost. But, it is only by exploring this sort of knowledge (which I believe not to have been lost) that we can hope to discover what may be called the “idea” of a university.

A university is a number of people engaged in a certain sort of activity: the Middle Ages called it *Studium*; we may call it “the pursuit of learning.” This activity is one of the properties, indeed one of the virtues of a civilized way of living; the scholar has his place beside the poet, the priest, the soldier, the politician and the man of business in any civilized society. The universities do not, however, have a monopoly of this activity. The hermit scholar in his study, an academy famous for a particular branch of learning, a school for young children, are each participants in this activity and each of them is admirable, but they are not universities. What distinguishes a university is a special manner of engaging in the pursuit of learning. It is a corporate body of scholars, each devoted to a particular branch of learning; what is characteristic is the pursuit of learning as a co-operative enterprise. The members of this corporation are not spread about the world, meeting occasionally or not at all; they live in permanent proximity to one another. And consequently we should neglect part of the character of a university if we omitted to think of it as a place. A university, moreover, is a home of learning, a place where a tradition of learning is preserved and extended, and where the necessary apparatus for the pursuit of learning has been gathered together.

Of the scholars who compose a university, some may be expected to devote an unbroken leisure to learning, their fellows having the advantage of their knowledge from their conversation and the world benefiting, perhaps, from their writings. A place of learning without this kind of scholar could scarcely be called a university. Others, however, will engage themselves to teach as well as to learn. But here again, it is the special manner of the pedagogic enterprise which distinguishes a university. Those who come to be taught at a university have to provide evidence that they are not merely beginners; and not only do they have displayed before them the learning of their teachers, but

they are offered a curriculum of study, to be followed by a test and the award of a degree. Three classes of person, then, go to compose a university as we know it—the scholar, the scholar who is also a teacher, and those who come to be taught, the undergraduates. And the presence of these three classes, and the relations that prevail between them, determine the distinctive place of a university in the wider enterprise we call the pursuit of learning.

Let us consider the activity of these three classes. Everyone who knows anything about it, knows that there is a difference between the pursuit of learning and the acquisition of information. It is a subtle difference, for an ill-informed man can scarcely be called a learned man. But a scholar is something more than a picker-up of unconsidered trifles: he knows something about what he is looking for, and he can distinguish between what he knows and what he does not know. The world's contempt for the "poor pedant" is often mistaken; it judges the scholar's activity by its use, and finds it pedantic when it appears useless. But this is a false standard; what is reprehensible is not the pursuit of knowledge which has no immediate use, nor that attention to detail which is unavoidable in scholarship, but that blind groping about among fragments of learning which are known only as fragments into which scholarship sometimes degenerates. This does not happen as often as the world thinks; and perhaps it is less liable to happen in a university than elsewhere.

There is, indeed, no simple way of determining what composes the world of learning; no clear reason—such as usefulness—can be found to justify its parts. They do not represent a premeditated purpose, but a slowly changing tradition. As the years pass, new studies rise above the horizon and old studies are rejuvenated by coming in contact with the new. Unavoidably, each scholar is something of a specialist who cultivates a chosen field. But it rarely happens that this is a very narrow field, and a scholar may often be found turning from one study to another or poking his nose into something which is not his chief business. Nevertheless, the pursuit of learning may have the appearance of a fragmentary enterprise; and even if we suspect that this is what it looks like when seen only from the outside, it will not seem far-fetched to enquire whether some superior integrating force is not wanted to give coherence and proportion to the whole pursuit. Do we not need a map, it may plausibly be asked, a map on which the relations between the parts of the world of learning are clearly displayed? Would not the whole thing be better for a little glue to hold it together? And some who feel most strongly about this are to be found filling in the interstices between the sciences with a sticky mess called "culture," in the belief that they are supplying a desperate need. But both the diagnosis and the remedy spring from a sad misconception.

The world of learning needs no extraneous cement to hold it together; its parts move in a single magnetic field, and the need for go-betweens arises only when the current is gratuitously cut off. The pursuit of learning is not a race in which the competitors jockey for the best place, it is not even an argument or

a symposium; it is a conversation. And the peculiar virtue of a university (as a place of many studies) is to exhibit it in this character, each study appearing as a voice whose tone is neither tyrannous nor plangent, but humble and conversable. A conversation does not need a chairman, it has no predetermined course, we do not ask what it is "for," and we do not judge its excellence by its conclusion; it has no conclusion, but is always put by for another day. Its integration is not superimposed but springs from the quality of the voices which speak, and its value lies in the relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate.

The scholar, then, is one who knows how to engage in the activity of learning; his natural voice is not that of the preacher or of the instructor. Yet it is not surprising that among scholars should be found teachers, and that university should be a place where one might go with the expectation of learning something. Not every scholar will have the sympathy that makes a great teacher, but every genuine scholar unavoidably imparts to those capable of recognizing it something of his knowledge on how to pursue learning. His power to teach springs from the force and inspiration of his knowledge, from his immersion in the pursuit of learning, which may be felt even by those little touched with the ambitions of a scholar. And even those whose learning and sympathy are ready, those who are pre-eminently capable of imparting what they know, must be expected to be something different from assiduous instructors. They may be trusted to know the rules, but they will not be much concerned to teach conclusions. One may go to some sorts of art schools and be taught ten ways of drawing a cat or a dozen tricks to remember in painting an eye, but the scholar as teacher will teach, not how to draw or to paint, but how to see. He may be easily articulate, or he may find it difficult to throw off his own doubts and hesitations, but, since he is a scholar, it does not belong to his character to speak with no voice in particular, and he will have nothing to do with vulgarization of learning which regards it merely as a means to passing an examination or winning a certificate.

But a university may be credited with a power to teach which goes beyond that of its individual scholars. It is not an academy drawing its inspiration from a single pre-eminent man; it is a body of scholars who supply one another's imperfections, both personal and scholastic. It accommodates many different sorts of teacher, and each sort draws its power from its intercourse with other sorts. When we commend the easily articulate don who has a ready answer for all our questions, we should remember that he is not simply a superlatively lively mind but is often the spokesman for the less articulate and perhaps more profound and original minds with which he is in daily communication: without them he would hardly exist. A university, then, is an institution peculiarly well-adapted to the weakness and ignorance of mankind because its excellence does not depend upon the appearance of a universal genius, though it

knows how to make room for one should one emerge. Moreover, like the House of Commons or an old established business, it imparts something without having expressly to teach it; and what it imparts in this way is at least the manners of the conversation.

The scholar, the teacher, and lastly those who come to be taught, the undergraduate: he, or she, also has a distinctive character. First, he is not a child, not a beginner. He has already had his schooling elsewhere, and has learned enough, morally and intellectually, to take a chance with himself upon the open sea. He is neither a child nor an adult, but stands in a strange middle moment of life when he knows only enough of himself and of the world which passes before him to wish to know more. He has not yet found what he loves, but neither is he jealous of time, of accidents, or of rivals. Perhaps the phrase from the fairy tale suits him best—he has come to seek his intellectual fortune. But, further, he is not the first who has passed from school to university, he is not like a stranger who knows nothing of what to expect, so that everything has to be explained to him on his arrival in words of one syllable. And if the tradition to which he belongs has already taught him anything, it will have taught him that he will not find his intellectual fortune, once and for all, in three years at a university. He is, therefore, we may suppose, in tune with what he is to find and is prepared to make use of it.

And what does he find? If he is not unlucky, he finds a strongly flowing current of activity, men and women engaged in the pursuit of learning, and an invitation to participate in some manner in this activity. This invitation is extended alike to those already touched by an ambition for a life of learning and to those who have no such ambition. A university is not a contrivance for making scholars; its ideal is not a world populated solely by scholars. For about 400 years in England the education of the would-be scholar and of the man of the world has been the same, and this tradition belongs to our idea of a university.