How do we save higher education in the UK from chaos?

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Stefan Collini has undoubtedly done a great service to the university community in channelling criticisms of the current state of higher education in the UK into popular public discourse, writes **Paul Benneworth.** *Readers will wryly raise an eyebrow at some of his characterisations of HE in this enjoyable and accessible read.*

What Are Universities For? Stefan Collini. Penguin. February 2012. 240 pages.

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Stefan Collini has been a prominent voice in recent public discussions concerning current changes to UK higher education. His recent essays in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books* were widely praised for skewering government proposals for their incoherence and inconsistency, and echoed what many academics had felt but been unwilling to say.

What Are Universities For? returns to this territory in a number of different ways, weaving a number of Collini's existing articles into a single volume, and attempting to build a more integrated defence of universities from his previous more specific critiques. Collini never really answers the question of what universities are actually for, but follows the question in a number of interesting directions. Along the way, he builds connections between Thomas Newman's mid-19th century *Idea of a University*, through the civic universities of the late 19th century, the rise of University Grants Committee after 1922, expansion in the 1960s and 1990s, and ultimately to what he regards as the muddle of today.

The volume is split into two parts. The first is more reflective whilst the second is more rhetorical, reprinting updated versions of a number of his earlier public outings. The fundamental argument in both parts is that universities have marginalised their humanities activities because of a drive to demonstrate their value to society. The humanities are distinctive because they individually can appear to be dilettante obsessions. But at the same time, the whimsical pursuit of humanities has always led to 'useful' outcomes without that ever being their point or purpose. And what is true for humanities is also true more generally for most kinds of non-vocationally focused higher education.

So the paradox is that the people who have made the case for universities being useful have not been able to fully grasp that certain subjects are useful, but that their use is not their justification. The institution of a university produces useful outcomes, but the point of that institution is not those useful outcomes. The problem with recent policy is that it has mistakenly assumed that this to be true. The effects have been profound for higher education as a whole. To try and make good this problem, Collini argues that one cannot start from arguments about use. Instead, and citing Thorsten Veblen, he argues a new 'genre' of argument for universities needs to be found, as "a corporation for the cultivation and

care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals" (p. 86).

There are two great strengths in this book. The first is that the criticisms made are well-founded. Collini does speak for a generation of England's university staff in expressing profound dissatisfaction with the intellectual incoherence and moral vacuity of contemporary higher education reforms. The aggregation and publication by Penguin of a number of Collini's more ephemeral critiques places them more permanently on the public record. This also makes them available to a future generation of scholars and journalists who will doubtless be looking back in decades to come trying to make sense of the mess into which England's universities are predicted to descend.

The second strength is that it is a very well-written book, and is a pleasure to read. Collini uses his literary talents to create a friendly atmosphere for the reader. The language has both the idiom of the professor entertaining in the senior common room as well as the friendly, instructive cadences of the tutorial. Some pieces, most notably Chapter 2, cry out to be declaimed rather than read, and the audience often feel that Collini is taking us into his confidences and the 'secret' world of the university. The overall effect is to make the reader highly sympathetic to the volume.

But that sympathy cannot override a more general feeling that the book promises a great deal more than it can deliver. Collini is very quick to hurry his audiences past the anecdotal and assertion-based sections of his arguments, even conceding this shortcoming early in the volume. The effect is that for all the book is excellent in diagnosing the problem, his prognosis and prescription remain insufficiently precise to form the basis for informed action by universities, professors or even Ministers. We know what Collini is against, in short, but it is much harder to see except in the most general terms how his favoured vision of the university might be delivered.

That should not detract from the fact that its two strengths more than justify its exceedingly reasonable cover price. Readers will wryly raise an eyebrow at some of his charming characterisations of the Wonderland of UK higher education *anno* 2012. Likewise, Collini has undoubtedly done a great service to the university community in assembling and channelling these criticisms into popular public discourse. One hopes that the critique can be speedily be squared with the political chaos and stem further irreparable harm to the great universities of England.

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Paul Benneworth is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands. Paul's research concerns the relationships between higher education, research and society, and he is currently Project Leader for the HERAVALUE research consortium (Understanding the Value of Arts & Humanities Research), part of the ERANET funded programme "Humanities in the European Research Area". Paul is a Fellow of the Regional Studies Association. Read more reviews by Paul.

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