

Faith Based Universities and COVID-19: A Time to Dig Deep for our Moral Compass?

Dr Ann Marie Mealey

Senior Teaching Fellow and Ethicist – Leeds Trinity University

I'm a regular listener to the WonkHE Podcast – directed by Mark Leach - and published on a weekly basis. It helps me to keep up to date with the kind of tense and oftentimes contentious discussions that pervade university life and work at every level: REF, KEF, TEF, Employability, the civic role of universities etc. The list is endless.

It probably comes as no surprise that this week's episode included a discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on universities – particularly as we come to the end of an academic cycle and embark on another. Academics and Vice-Chancellors are asking questions about how the National Student Survey, for example, will be used and what significance or authority will it really have this year in ranking universities on the League Tables? And if this ranking happens, will it have a bearing on whether students choose to study at one university over another or will everyone just 'write-off' the National Student Survey this year in favour of an approach which considers the university's already-established reputation for Teaching and Learning?

But these are not the only questions: other questions include what happens if we're still on 'lock-down' in September and we have to teach online? Some of us are 'kind of' doing that now in providing resources and online support for students finishing final year dissertations and students finishing their first and second years of study – and hoping to progress to the next year if they manage to stay well in the meantime. A constant worry for our students now is: 'what if I get sick?' 'What will happen to my degree?'; 'Will my grades plummet?'; 'And if I get poorer grades this year, will these count towards my degree next year?'. And, perhaps most importantly of all, students are wondering: 'Who can I turn to at the university if I need to tell someone about how I am really feeling right now, and what could they do for me anyway even if I did?'

Most students studying at universities in the UK have a personal tutor. This is a designated person on the staff team who can help to support students in time of crisis or worry and/or give academic and or pastoral support when and where it is needed. The extent to which academics are good at this kind of pastoral support tends - in my opinion - to vary from person to person. Some colleagues foster fantastic relationships with their students and go 'above and beyond' the call of duty to support them in their study and to 'listen to the stories of their lives'. Oftentimes, it is this 'listening ear' which students at smaller institutions in particular tend to cite as the most helpful context for giving them the confidence, motivation and self-belief that success is possible – in spite of who they are or where they come from or what issues they have. Education can be the great liberator and leveller, especially where self-worth is concerned.

This kind of person-centred approach is often the driving force behind faith-based institutions. This is not to say that secular universities do not care for students. Of course they do. But is it to emphasise that those universities which claim to be operating on Gospel values and on the premise that, as the Catholic Social Encyclicals tell us, 'the dignity of the human person' is of paramount

importance must now allow this principle to pervade everything that they do during the COVID-19 crisis. We need to be working together to find the best ways of supporting our students in way that truly embodies human dignity and the belief that when we are dealing with people, we are dealing with a person who is the image of God and a divine creation who is de facto deserving of dignity. As pointed out in *Economic Justice for All*, 'When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are [...] #28.

This is not to shoe-horn those who do not have a faith into believing in God – especially those who work at Catholic or faith-based universities; rather it is to emphasise that working with students during this challenge is a special, unique and a morally charged space – in which each person's story and/or circumstance will have to be considered in detail, listened to and acknowledged in the most respectful way possible. For the person of faith, this is the holy space but for everyone it is the space in which the most profoundly human understanding of who we are is to be found and respected in its entirety. This is a value that we can all relate to both on a moral and – for those who believe – spiritual level.

But what would this like look in practice in our faith-based universities that are struggling at the moment to stay open and to continue to support undergraduates and post graduates in their studies when libraries are closed, people's children are at home and this puts a strain on their time, when deadlines are looming, and when the future – for everyone – is so uncertain? What can we do? Academics often say that they became educators because they wanted to 'make a difference'. What is that difference now?

The first thing to say is that in the realm of the human, and when it comes to doing the right thing morally, no one person or organisation has all of the answers. With COVID-19, we are dealing with unknowns all of the time, which is why we must remain open-minded in relation to the moral and ethical approaches we adopt in universities and in society at this challenging time. But, as a first step, we could say that collaboration is a key value to uphold at present. For decades the Open University led the way in relation to online learning and providing remote support to students. Given that a large number of academics will now have to upskill rapidly to provide the best possible teaching and learning experience to their students from a distance (rather than face-to-face), we need to be open to learning from colleagues – in our home institutions and from others who have vast amounts of experience in online delivery. This may require a kind of humility that is perhaps a little uncomfortable and unsettling. But if we see digital and online skills as part of what we need to address the current crisis, then humility must be the order of the day. A first step then might be: consult with those who know.

A second step might relate to creativity. As most of the blogs relating to the COVI-19 virus found on the Advance HE website this week seem to emphasise, we must try to be creative about the 'wrap around' support we give our students – this is above and beyond just academic support. Faith-based institutions must and have an obligation to find creative ways of protecting, supporting and caring for our students in this difficult period of lock down. Personal tutoring must take on new formats, new guises, new levels of interaction and new levels of communications between senior executive colleagues, students and faculty staff in order to put the right kinds of procedures and support mechanisms in place for students that uphold human dignity and respect their individual circumstances and context. This may not be so easy for bigger cohorts as it is hard for tutors to reach everyone but in smaller programmes – where most people know each other – this should be possible. As Rachel Hillam from the Open University reminds us, it is important to provide resources and platforms of support 'outside' the classroom too <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge->

[hub/stem2020-providing-skills-through-online-mathematics-and-statistics-learning](https://www.leeds.ac.uk/hub/stem2020-providing-skills-through-online-mathematics-and-statistics-learning). This should include a virtual environment where students feel safe to speak to their personal tutor about exactly what is going on in their lives right now so that we don't end up penalising them unjustly for late submissions, non-submission or related issues.

All of these pieces of advice bring us back to the central premise of this blog which is to emphasise that at this time the dignity of the human person is paramount in relation to what we put in place to support our students and how we relate to them and treat them at this challenging time. In the incarnation we find the most amazing example of God-made-flesh and dwelling amongst us. This means that the human is sacred, special, unique, worthy of irrevocable dignity. This is theological of course but, put differently, institutions built on the Christian faith must put relationship and the dignity of the human person at the heart of their response to supporting students in teaching and learning throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This will require creativity, listening, dialogue with everyone -those of faith and none – dialogue with our competitors, and, most of all, deep dialogue with our students. We need to see more than ever before that this now a sacred task, requiring skill and a delicate understanding of how and in what new ways our moral compass is guiding us to respond, to teach, to be and to react to our vocation as educators.

Finally, this moral compass is not confined only to the walls of the academy and the students. In this period of 'lock-down', there are ways that universities can still live out their civic roles even in a time of crisis. One way is to be virtually present in meetings in the communities where they are located at time crucial time. The work of Leeds Citizens -a subsidiary of Citizens UK – is an example of how Leeds Trinity University is still trying to support the city of Leeds during this difficult time. Social justice work does not stop just because we are on lock-down; the quest to create conditions in which all can succeed and flourish continues – even more so now that we are on lock down in different homes – some rich, some poor – some with internet, and some with not enough food in the fridge or isolated and alone. Of course, any of these categories of people could also be our students but they are also our neighbours living in close proximity to the universities in our towns and cities, so we should support our local charities and organisations by at the very least campaigning with them virtually and supporting with ideas in online meetings etc – especially if we are well enough to do so from our own homes. We have to remember that a university that has 'the person' at its centre must not exclude the persons living in its surrounding areas. Now is an opportunity to embrace the civic and moral role of the university and extend our skills to the communities in which we live by offering freely what we know and what we do best as we try to find new ways of living, shopping, surviving, working and worshipping.

In the light of this final point, I would like to end by saying that even if this period of lock down Leeds Citizens and Citizens UK are taking action for the common good in a variety of ways including:

- Campaigning for key workers like carers, supermarket workers, and hospital cleaners receive the real Living Wage of £9.30 per hour (£10.75 per hour in London).
- Working with schools and education partners to persuade supermarkets and Government to ensure no child on free school meals goes hungry if schools close.
- Lobbying the Mayor of London to speak out for those migrants for whom a loss of income could jeopardise their immigration claim
- Brokering links between Facebook and faith leaders to provide additional online support to Facebook for those believers who cannot attend their place of worship at this time.

Leeds Trinity University – a founding member of Leeds Citizens – is part of these discussions and is supporting this work at this difficult time. I can't help but feel this is a time when 'love thy neighbour' is taking on a new meaning - the implications of which will become evident only in the aftermath of this crisis.

Dr Ann Marie Mealey has taught ethics at Leeds Trinity University for 14 years. She leads the Philosophy, Ethics and Religion programme and is very interested in issues around student engagement.

*She is the author of *The Identity of Christian Morality* (2009) and editor-in-chief of *Perspectives in Social Justice* (2018). She has also written on the ethics of stem cells, environmental ethics, Catholic Social Teaching and social justice from a faith perspective.*

More recently, Ann Marie has been promoted to Senior Teaching Fellow and is the programme co-ordinator for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at Leeds Trinity. She is also the co-ordinator for Fellowship applications.

Ann Marie is the co-chair of Leeds Citizens, and is actively involved in promoting the Living Wage campaign across the city of Leeds and beyond.