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Changing spatial and synchronous structures in the history and culture of learning : a Heideggerian analysis of the history of the English university

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Abstract

This paper argues that the conceptions of 'space' (and increasingly 'time') in the discussion of 'the university' (in its most transcendent sense) have gone through four distinct phases in the UK. Using a Heideggerian conception of 'space' where usefulness is more important than proximity, the 'ancient' universities were 'useful' to the gentry and thus were 'closer' to them than to the excluded 'local' poor in the institutions' vicinities. The 'civic' universities on the other hand stressed 'localism' as part of their mandate 'to educate the people of their locality (but only those of the new industrial middle class). The 'Robbins' universities were a partial return to the 'ancient' notion of learning as a 'lived' activity, providing scenic landscapes on green-belt campuses where students could 'retreat' from the 'real world' for the duration of their studies. The 'spatial' quality of these places was thus part of a conception of higher education as 'lifestyle choice' where young people moved away from their locality to study. As such 'proximity' was an issue only insofar as the greater the distance from

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one's point of origin the better for successful immersion in the growing student 'culture'. The 'new/post-1992' universities partially retained their polytechnic mandate to educate local people, but embraced a colonialist impulse regarding local space usage. ? ?The discussion can be further refined to argue that these four stages are merely two phases which have repeated themselves: from ancient 'exclusivity' to civic 'localism' and back to Robbins era 'exclusivity' and thence to post-1992 'localism' once more?. The opening up of higher education via the Internet in the late 20th and early 21st centuries provides for the possibility of the growth of entirely non-spatial and asynchronous learning experiences, and as such we may well be on the verge of the fifth stage of university development. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)