

Universities as metaphors

A huge corpus of research has been done on universities as places of knowledge and learning, and about their role in training future skilled and civilized citizens, as well as their priorities as educational institutions. But how much do we know about the word itself and its origin? It is, most of the time, believed that *University* as a word is something of the mundane.

If you ask anyone, even those exercising a profession within universities, about the origin or meaning of the word university, they will, undoubtedly, think of that place where people apply to a programme, attend courses of their choice, get a certificate or a degree as a step to join the labour force. They will refer to it as a place where several disciplines, subjects and fields are being taught to students. For the majority, it is also a place where people conduct research, or/and meet to discuss, debate, analyse, and tackle issues of relevance to people of different persuasions.

Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries define the word as 'a place of higher education usually for people who have finished twelve years of schooling and where they can obtain more knowledge and skills, and get a degree' or 'an institution at the highest level of education where you can study for a degree or do research'ⁱⁱ. Etymology? This is the interesting part.

Originating in medieval Latin-*universitatem/universitas*-derived from *universus*, the word literally meant 'whole' or 'aggregate'. The prefix '*uni*' (one) and the word *versus* meaning to turn, to convert and to change well suggest that it is all about 'turning into one', 'a whole formed by combining separate elements'ⁱⁱⁱ. Subsequently, in its late Latin use, the word took a different, yet related meaning which will bestow it its academic sense: a society, a corporation, an entire, a **community**. From *Universitas Magistrorum et Scholarium* (community of masters and scholars) to old French 'universite', to Anglo-French 'université', to modern day 'university', the word -university- somehow still carries that meaning of community, a body of persons and knowledges constituting one whole within one shared space.

Let us dive deeper.

In Arabic, the word university translates to الجامعة /al ja:mi'a/ (fem) : (a gathering place) derived from to gather, to meet, to converge, to collect. Its masculine counterpart, الجامع /al ja:mi'i/, is often juxtaposed to the word *mosque*. However, it has one special sense, often overlooked.

Like Al Ja:mi'a (الجامعة), Al Ja:mi'i (الجامع) derives from to gather, to collect and to unite. In the Islamic tradition, the word Al Ja:mi'i refers to an Islamic religious genre or rather a type of religious books, eg: Jami' at-Tirmidhi (جامع الترمذي), which is a complete collection, a compilation of *hadiths* (prophet Muhammed's sayings). These books are usually full collections, compilations of certain subjects, facts, interpretation of matters pertaining to Islam in general or to Islamic culture. To make it short, this tradition uses the word *Al Jami'i* to mean collecting, gathering in one place or space (the book), uniting, 'bringing many into one'. This word, aside from referring to a book, also referred, at one point in history, to a place of learning and knowledge and not specifically and uniquely a place for worship. The word **Jami'i** was a title initially given to the University of Al Qaraouiyine in its early days!

Whether in Latin, French, English or Arabic, the word university carries within its folds the meaning of the 'many into one'. Being both a place and a community/a body of persons with common goals, a university is a *metaphor* for bringing people together to think and thrive together.

The word university at last is nothing of the mundane, for it will surprise us more.

Back to the word University or /universe-city/. Isn't a university itself a universe of its own? Don't we walk it as if we walk through a city? Didn't Ibn Sina (Avicenna) say that Man is a miniature universe? The reader may easily apprehend the simile. However, if one is to look at universities as universes or cities, then one must look at one primordial aspect that is the essence of what we know as universe and what we call city: Meaning.

Both the universe and cities are physical and conceptual constructs that we continuously think, conceive of and (re)shape. The meaning we make of these conceptual and physical realities, knowing that meaning making is a very complex process of understanding and construing whatever we experience, and which relates to our being and becoming, can be also projected onto a university space, as being and becoming are tightly related to learning- we learn to become; we make meaning of what we learn and the experience of learning. Universities being themselves smaller universes with their specific order of things and their unique purpose, also makes one think of movement and motion. If everything in the universe revolves around one thing-be it the sun or a star or anything yet to come, and if everything in a city revolves around a specific place, be it a market, a square, a workplace..., then likewise, everything in a university revolves around...? KNOWLEDGE. And it happens that the embodiment of knowledge is nothing but us.

If we see universities as places mirroring the vast universe, we will surely be amazed by the intricate and vast network of connections, interactions and transactions that happen between the people working or/and studying at a university.

Going back to /universe-city/. One is surprized to find the same pattern in the word university in several languages: French, Spanish, German, Russian are some examples.

The metaphors that the word university articulate might be an interesting subject of study. Whether a gathering place or a community or a smaller universe, universities remain special places of which many have indelible memories and where many have reached intellectual and scientific lustre.

ⁱ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Etymology.com