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Today outside the University’s Firth Court building, a rainbow flag is flying. It shows the support of this University for Sheffield Pride which takes place this weekend, and is a powerful symbol of inclusion and welcome to many, not only LGBT staff and students.

But flags too often stand for anything but diversity. On news bulletins from around our world, flags are waved by insurgents from tanks or draped across the casualties of conflict. What is the pride of one nation and can move us to tears with patriotic fervour is all too often to another a symbol of oppression which triggers memories of lost homelands and injustices which taint the present.

And yet a University is an international community, full of multiple allegiances and deep connections to many nations. So if I was to say one thing about a University that convinces me that it is important, it is that it can build the ability to know, to share and then to understand those different from us. Or more to the point, to see that the differences we conjure often from thin air are in the end paltry things. But they can drive deep anger and resentment in our society. Is it possible to avoid this pit?

Look at what is happening with international students. The vitriol in the latest problems on student visas is driven from many misperceptions. It could, to our dismay, end with us denying young people the opportunity to study with us and making us a viable and vibrant international academic community. I dread to think how many students from the Indian subcontinent will be put off by the latest announcements about suspended licenses for a small number of education providers, and the way these will inevitably be reported alongside tales of xenophobia.

But how can we from our position of privilege confront the fears that of many of our fellow citizens who do worry about the pressure on resources which they feel they must protect. We must not patronise or belittle them. Their concerns are genuine and heartfelt.

We must understand their fears and concerns, but how we do this matters. Universities have a reputation for sometimes being better at speaking than listening. But if this is the case, our capacity to help and to have something truly meaningful to say is limited. This is why what we sometimes call ‘engagement’ is so vital - it not only reminds us of the insights, experiences and needs of our fellow human beings. It drives us back to our own questions and challenges us to think about a subject more deeply, to ask if we are seeing only in part.

This respect for others, a humility which does not turn away from need is a quality which can transform our scholarship into a power for great good. We have to make sure we have heard enough to respond not with what we have but with what is right for them.

The proverb says, “When someone asks for bread, don’t give them a stone.” My primary response to the current anxiety about migration is that it comes in the most part from genuine fear for children’s futures which awakens the old worries about others. The challenge for us is not to bury the question, the desire for financial security and work we also
crave. We can't. If people are worried about getting a job, don't blame the immigrant seeking a job. Help your neighbour find a job, so that they stop worrying.

But how do we do this in practice? How do we mix our intelligence with care, show the kind of deep respect which is in the spirit of loving our neighbour as ourselves, because we are not standing over them but standing by them?

Our University is answering this in many ways, but the motivation which inspires those actions has a common core.

I saw it profoundly in action when our Enactus Team (formerly Students Into Free Enterprise) showed me the pitch that won them the national competition. It is something I would like our entire university to see - how our students began by mentoring victims of human trafficking and homeless people in our own city, and then moved from there to building confidence to enterprise.

But they took a step further, they listened. And as they did they saw a need which challenged them. The crucial barrier for those who had for desperate reasons dropped out of full society was to break back into employment but, in a vicious cycle, they needed elusive work experience to do that. Our students took the modest resources they had created and built this into enterprise which directly offered employment. Fellow human beings who had despaired found hope. The students drew on business skills to link to companies and seek mass orders for products, wealth grew and with it the ability to offer more employment. And individuals broke out of joblessness and either moved onto paid employment or began their own enterprises.

Alongside the optimistic voices of our wonderful students who come from all over the world, I heard the voice of a woman who had been trafficked but is rebuilding her life for herself and her child. I saw a formerly homeless man beaming at a new chance. The commitment and determination to pay close attention and act was humbling. The team will take their pitch to Beijing for the Enactus World Cup. But whatever happens, their message needs to be heard and seen.

I see the same instinct in our Apprentice Training Centre where young people and companies' needs are listened to with enough respect to create a new approach to higher vocational education. Where this week Vince Cable MP said that he was seeing the future of advanced technical education. Where the Director of Global Manufacturing at Rolls-Royce Hamid Mughal said, if he were 16 again and considering 100 options for his future, this would be the one he would choose.

I see this care in the work to secure funding for Postgraduate Taught students and the desire to help our world in a poem on material that cleans the air that we breathe. I see my colleague Richard Jones who is determined to clarify how truly bad our economy has got in term of innovation and growth, and to explain how genuinely important our research and innovation is to our region and our nation. I know this is driven by his resolve to work with the city to make the economy our young people need. This scholarship unites our intellect
with purpose and action.

We will not address problems by not believing we can help. We must not listen to those who say that things are not in our control or that market forces and public opinion will inevitably scupper our actions. They are human inventions and they can be challenged, and must be.

Our University is made up of people from many nations. We are a community which is both diverse and purposeful, a proud rainbow state if ever there was one. But it must not be a gated community, a walled city. It needs to reach over those walls, and the flag we fly must not be for ourselves alone.

A flag does not have to be exclusive. It can also be a symbol of hope. Our task as a University is to ensure that we are not deaf to our wider world, but that we both listen and act. This is not only how we will thrive materially. It will give us the courage to remake who we are and to be sure our future is one which others will welcome.

Professor Sir Keith Burnett
Vice-Chancellor