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Rummidge 2050 (And Beyond!)

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The University of Rummidge is based in England and was founded in the early twentieth century. It has a global reputation with a long and distinguished history of international exchange programmes for students and academics, with the USA being a key collaborator. The university is very proud of its presence and hosting of many international high-profile conferences, which again fosters relationships and collaborations. Rummidge is also a pioneer in its close relationship and work with local industry. Much of this work was established in the 1960s and 1970s, and the university is now looking forward with a new strategy in place for 2050 and beyond.

The Rummidge President and CEO is keen to have a modern and catchy mission to wow students and international collaborators. They have decided to work with PR and communications company TellIt to write a mission statement to go along with the new strategy.

TellIt CEO John Droper has been pitching for several months to secure the Rummidge contract, and he has received the call from the University Strategy Office informing him that they have secured the job. TellIt has worked recently with tech start-ups getting into education but never with a university so this is new ground, and if they can get it right, lots more work will follow. Droper considers who might be best to work on this and brings it up at a hastily arranged board meeting.

‘Is there any money in Education?’, asks Droper. ‘We’ve won a job to come up with a mission statement for a university and their 2050 strategy.’

‘It’s the new big thing, boss – there’s a new EdTech unicorn popping up everyday.’

‘A unicorn?’

‘A company that has been valued by investors at more than one billion dollars.’

The room of executives look up—with raised eyebrows and interest—from their tablets, phones, and laptops.

‘There’s no money in Education though surely?’

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‘Well sir, it seems as though there is. These tech companies don’t just supply the technology, they work and collaborate with schools and universities. Some companies are even bypassing institutions altogether to offer courses and qualifications aligned with jobs. The really smart ones get employers involved too – university education is a market now and if it’s expensive, students want to see a job at the end of it. And best of all, the rapid pace of change in tech means that people need courses throughout their lives – that’s the killer hook anyway.’

Droper sees potential. ‘Interesting. I did see something about AI and robots being the future of education. Have we done anything close to this recently?’

‘I’ll check it out and get some details to you.’

Anya is a communications specialist at TellIt. She specialises in campaigns for technology start-ups and large corporates. Recently, she has worked with several organisations to rebrand and reposition websites, social media, and mission statements. One of these was Metaversity, a new online platform. Anya is called for a meeting with Droper to present her work.

‘...Yes Mr Droper, the Metaversity offers virtual reality job related degrees and courses – all online and global. They work with tech employers and universities. Here’s the copy we came up with for them.’

Enter the Metaverse with Metaversity. Education is faced with key issues of affordability and relevance. The Metaversity offers short and fast, career-focused courses, directly relevant to your career aspirations. Forget the dreary theory and study with experts in the tech world in our virtual reality platform.

‘I like it! It’s the future! Anya, we have a job with a university in England, Rummidge. They want a mission statement to go along with their 2050 strategy and beyond. That beyond bit is important, I’m told! I’m putting you on it, it’s a big one – a really good opportunity for us.’

Anya sets to work on some initial research before getting in contact with the Rummidge Strategy Office, and they set up a Zoom call.

‘Hello Anya, I’m Naz, I head up the Strategy Office, great to have you on board for the project!’

‘Thanks Naz, really excited to be working with a top-ranking university like Rummidge – it has quite a history.’

‘Yes it does – we’re very proud.’

‘I’ve done quite a bit of research already and your US collaborations, conferences, and work with industry are quite impressive. So then, I propose that I come and spend some time at Rummidge to get a good feel for the vibe of the place, speak to academics, other staff and students. I like to really get under the skin of the organisations that I work with...’

‘That all sounds great Anya. However, I should say that we are up against some quite tight timescales with our new strategy 2050...’

‘And beyond!’, Anya enthusiastically adds.

‘Yes, yes, and beyond, you’re right, that bit is important. You see, the thing is... we launch the strategy soon and there are some key dates around rankings and reputation, so we need this mission statement and strategy out there ASAP.’

‘I understand totally Naz, I can move really quickly on this – you are an important client.’

‘Ah, one more thing...’

‘Sure, no problem Naz.’

‘Well, we did start the work internally. We had some academics and the media team produce some statements and visuals and we have three different versions.’

‘Sure, I can work with that, big corporate organisations have lots of complexity, I’m used to that; ping the work over.’

An e-mail arrives in Anya’s inbox with three statements and visuals (Table 1). Anya looks at the e-mail and the images and realises that this might be a trickier task than she thought. There seems to be some quite different perspectives on what Rummidge University is or wants to be in 2050 and beyond.

Anya gets on a train from London to Rummidge to agree the first draft of the mission statement. She arrives at the meeting, and discussions have already begun between the group, including the authors of the three statements, all senior academics and managers at Rummidge. The meeting is heated and fraught already...

‘So, do we actually do anything ourselves in this so-called network?’

‘Apple don’t actually make their phones you know, they are just the brand and our brand is Rummidge!’

‘And the reason we have a reputation and brand – our research and teaching? Given over and outsourced to others?’

‘We’re a network of collaborators, NOT just sitting in our Ivory Towers which is what the first statement sounds like!’

‘Researchers and teachers don’t want to be tied to one organisation – they want the freedom to work on different projects all the time.’

‘Gig work! It’s the thing now. You don’t have to be tied to one university, you can provide content for anyone. Not just universities either, blogs, social media etc, it’s great for impact.’

‘It’s called unbundling!’

‘More short-term contracts then!’

‘Here we go, we’re going to go all Marxist!’

‘Well, you own the means of production yourself – your laptop.’

‘Yes, but who owns the infrastructure and the content I create – Big Tech!’

‘This will go the same way as journalism, a hobby and no pay! A content provider!’

‘There’s nothing wrong with technology and distance learning if we do it in the right way. It can provide huge amounts of social benefits and access to knowledge.’

‘Or MBAs for the rich.’

‘More employment focused courses... I’m a researcher, not a trainer!’

‘Yes! We should be about the why, not the instrumental how!’

‘That’s harping back to the elitist Ivory Tower! We should be useful to society and do it efficiently.’

‘Like a factory?’

‘Well, in a way, but a factory is linear with inputs and outputs which we can see in the second statement. The network collaborates with all – we shouldn’t be the sole producers and purveyors of knowledge.’

Anya jumps in to try and take control. ‘We’re a good example of a collaborator working with you on your brand and we want it to be future focused!’

Table 1 Three statements and visuals for Rummidge 2050 and beyond

Mission 1	Ivory Tower
<p>Since 1904, Rummidge has been a site of elite enquiry and discovery. Our teaching and research are inseparable, and we have a long tradition of providing scientific discovery and critically acclaimed literature to the world. Knowledge is an end in itself at Rummidge with academic freedom to enquire and discover – a key part of democratic societies. Our students are the brightest and best and will continue to be in 2050 and beyond.</p>	 <p>Photo by Steven Van Elk (Unsplash licence)</p>
Mission 2	Factory
<p>Rummidge is a site of meritocratic opportunity and mass appeal. Our research is focused on solving the world's most pressing issues and constantly receives national recognition for excellence. Our teaching, consistently commended for excellence nationally provides knowledge and skills needed in the workplace and is drawn from world-leading research outputs. Both our research and our teaching produce products which meet the needs of the present and for 2050 and beyond!</p>	 <p>Photo by Joshua Hoehne (Unsplash licence)</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Mission 3	Network
<p>Rummidge is a node in the network of a global society. We are networked with researchers, students, employers, governments, technology partners and all of society. Aided by the information communication technologies revolution our campus borders are not restricted in possibilities when it comes to the reach and impact of our teaching or research. This allows us to work with specialists in teaching and research in a collaborative manner. This is just the beginning of the future which will take us to 2050 and beyond!</p>	 <p>Photo by John Schnobrich (Unsplash licence)</p>

‘Well, if we want to talk brand, you might say the first statement is an old-fashioned ivory tower but that’s what students and funders pay for!’

‘Ok, let’s take a quick coffee break, this thing needs to be finished today’, says Anya, not confident of getting a resolution. She leads the participants out towards the coffee shop.

‘Not getting very far are we’, Tom, one of the meeting participants, says to Anya.

‘You didn’t say much in the meeting, what’s your view? What do you think Rummidge’s vision for 2050 should be?’

‘2050?’ smirked Tom.

‘Oh yes, and beyond!’, remembers Anya.

‘Well, I’ve been in quite a few of those meetings over the years and there’s a quote I always think of from a book called the Multiversity written in the 1960s... A chap called Clark Kerr said university staff don’t agree on much or have much in common; they’re just a group of entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking.’

‘There does seem to be a problem here with parking’, commented Anya.

‘Don’t mention that back in there, it’s already hostile enough.’

‘Kerr said, the university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself. Kant, in his *Conflict of the Faculties*, said the same. It’s healthy in many ways to be disagreeing and debating our purpose.’

‘That doesn’t help me’, despaired Anya.

‘No, it doesn’t. Kerr did also say that if a university becomes too big and too conservative and does not change, it will become extinct. That doesn’t mean all of the old values should be thrown out though – maybe just re-moulded.’

Some sense at last, thought Anya. ‘Can you say that back in there?’

‘And face that wrath? No way!’ said Tom.

‘This will never be agreed in two weeks, never mind by 2050!’
 ‘Or beyond, Anya, or beyond!’

Acknowledgements This vignette is based on the conceptual framework developed in ‘The idea and becoming of a university across time and space: Ivory Tower, Factory and Network’ (Matthews 2022). It is influenced by Connell (2019), Kant (1992), Kerr (1982), Lodge (2011), Matthews (2021), McCowan (2017) and Ralston (2021).

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