Universities are surely by their very nature already the most innovative organisations in the UK; a significant proportion of the people in them are paid to discover new things. However, although higher education institutions are very innovative in what they do, they are not so innovative in what they are. Perhaps truly ‘social innovation’ requires a fundamental review of the current system. If we’re to develop society effectively, we need new ways of restructuring longstanding social relationships. We are still teetering on the brink of recession, the social aspiration gap is getting deeper and wider. Mass resentment at the waste of peoples’ lives and potential is building. How do we help create citizens who are more whole, more engaged, altruistic and resourceful?

I suggest there are four big challenges – issues or opportunities – that could form the starting point for a more radical rethinking of universities’ role in relation to social innovation. These are the nature of universities as organisations, the student relationship and offer, the changing business model and new kinds of competition, and universities and their relationship to their localities.

The nature of HEIs as organisations creates problems around the notion of shared mission and of mobilisation. It also inhibits innovation, which springs precisely from bringing people with different perspectives together.

Interdisciplinary activity, despite the rhetoric, is still fairly marginal in universities. There are no real structures for collaboration or innovation, and incentives for it aren’t well aligned across disciplines. John Goddard’s research (see references) has also shown how difficult public agencies can find collaboration with HEIs. Vice-chancellors can commit to partnership but in reality they have very little influence in actually making it happen. It’s exasperating.

Let’s turn now to the student relationship and offer. As Stefan Collini (2012) points out, there are two different paradigms: student as learner and student as consumer. This creates a tension, a reverse hierarchy. The learner defers to the teacher, but the consumer is in charge. But why not conceptualise the student as citizen student, as a member of the university? Employability – equipping our students for the world of work – is now much more important and urgent. Institutions should be offering high-quality job placements as part of their degrees. The modern world needs people who can collaborate, work in teams; the challenge for universities is in building that into learning and assessment.

The core business model for higher education is also problematic. Higher education is expensive and labour-intensive, and its costs compared to those in the rest of the economy continue to rise. Universities have still not tackled the big problem of overhead costs. In the ‘new’ student relationship some things that were very important in the past are no longer so, and vice versa. Content versus employability is one example. The rise of open educational resources makes the content offer more problematic, because content is everywhere. The content offer has to change – ‘teaching’ has to be more about mediation, facilitation of learning, not delivery of content. With increasing competition from private and international providers, the complex nature of universities that combine research, teaching and a social purpose may require a fundamental re-examination of HEIs’ business model.

Finally I’d like to talk about universities as part of place – their locality, their city, their region – with a return to Goddard’s research. Are HEIs using their full potential in managing the challenges of the places of which they are part? We need to foster creative alliances between local government, business and commercial partners and HEIs, based on a common understanding of the challenges facing their localities. HEIs have a responsibility to be fully engaged in those challenges and to be leading these alliances. They’re the ones with the headspace to think creatively about the challenges their localities face and release their hidden wealth and creative minds.

Innovation is about reflectivity, thinking about yourself: surely that’s part of universities’ core missions?

These strategic reflections are based on a keynote speech by Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA, at the joint Leadership Foundation and Hefce Future Proofing Higher Education conference on 25 January 2012, and on Matthew’s pre-speech blog posts.

References
Strategic Reflections

Matthew Taylor’s original blogpost (including discussion of John Goddard’s research):

And the follow-up blogpost:
www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/thersa/innovation-is-as-innovation-does/