

Why contradiction is (and always will be) higher education's great strength

Martin Hughes

Higher education is full of contradiction. Contradiction conjures up images of uncertainty. And that makes me hopeful for the future.

Universities thrive on exploration and multiple perspectives. Every institution is rife with healthy argument. The pursuit of learning often conflicts with the pursuit of a better career. In short, one person's potion is another's poison.

No single purpose for HE can be defined. Yet this is precisely why I am optimistic. Far from a lack of purpose, we should celebrate an abundance of purposes.

However, in such uncertain times, focus can get lost amongst the contradiction. Ferdinand von Prondzynski says:

"...students sometimes [see HE] solely as the route to a formal qualification to establish their careers, industry as a way of providing specialist and sometimes quite narrow skills, and governments as a way of keeping people off the dole queues. The educational character of education is sometimes lost in all this and needs to be re-discovered.¹"

As a diverse community, we cannot all face the same direction, but we should aim to work as a collective nonetheless. The sector has faced – among other things – an economic crisis, the Browne review, an altered fees system, and a forthcoming White Paper, fuelling uncertainty at the worst possible time. Contradiction can offer a lifeline:

"Contradiction... reminds us that resolution is fragile, temporary and, very often, incomplete – that disorder always looms. But perhaps these are the very qualities that fuel an inquiring mind. Perhaps we need contradiction to keep us alert to the responsibility of acting on our imaginations.²"

Our responsibility as individuals and as a collective should still offer flexibility. A broad brush approach to policy should be replaced by arrangements that can focus more

¹ "Do students learn anything much at college?", Ferdinand von Prondzynski - <http://bit.ly/fOxafN>

² "Working imaginatively with/in contradiction", Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 33:2, p.1

specifically on different types of engagement within HE. It is necessary for a sector that has been given too many roles; otherwise focus is increasingly replaced by dilution.

According to outgoing president of Universities UK, Steve Smith:

“we must work together as a united sector, celebrating difference, not seeing it as hierarchy, and always celebrating excellence in all its forms³”.

There is no doubt that individuals within the sector assume many different identities. This should be applauded, so long as there is scope to work in a capacity that highlights the many, sometimes opposing, strengths of the sector. HE should benefit society as a whole⁴. To do this, focus must rest more on achievement, and less on competition.

However, as public funding is replaced by larger loans, universities (and students) are entering a time of commodification and marketisation. Should institutions seek continued success by covering a growing number of bases, or by choosing to concentrate from a more specialist viewpoint?

In true contradictory terms, I say both. The student landscape is changing and the future of funding is unlikely to be clear any time soon. It is crucial to open doors to an ever-diverse population and to provide accordingly. The trouble is making sense of how to ‘provide accordingly’.

Policy-makers are in danger of rushing into inappropriate action at the very time when measured leadership⁵ will surely pay the greatest dividends⁶. Those offering creative leadership will seek to capitalise on continuous change, rather than attempting to maintain a rigid set of goals. Change requires agility, not a mad dash.

Until we fully acknowledge the wide remit HE covers, we cannot clearly identify the major (sometimes uniquely defining) differences within. Education as a concept is subjective and covers such varied purposes that universities cannot help but compete “on status rather than educational effectiveness⁷”. The future of HE should allow status to be less about false or misleading hierarchies and more about Who, What,

3 “Meeting our shared aspirations: Supporting economically and socially relevant higher education”, Perspectives 14:3, p.75

4 “System members at odds: managing divergent perspectives in the higher education change process”, Kathy Barnett, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 33:2, p.138

5 “Maximising the effectiveness of a scenario planning process”, Nicola Sayers, Perspectives 15:1, p.14

6 “Serve the servants, or leadership by degrees”, Finbarr Livesey, Times Higher Education, 31 March 2011

7 “Policy Watch”, Roger Brown, Perspectives 14:4, p.128

Why, When, Where and How it can boost the needs and desires of society and its members⁸.

Therefore, rushed decisions to save money are short-sighted. Stasis needs to be challenged, but so does change. The nature of HE suggests it should keep on questioning, giving and developing in line with our own inquisitiveness as human beings. We objectivise and restrict/limit at our peril!

I am especially impressed by Lincoln's 'Student as Producer'⁹, which aims to reconnect research and teaching "in a way that consolidates and substantiates the values of academic life". Students actively engage in research and learning, rather than consuming knowledge. The unique elements at Lincoln are the students, the active research, and the ethos. Focus moves from subjects and qualifications to a way of being. Difference and contradiction are welcomed and – better still – can benefit everyone.

Alternative institutions which aspire to make education completely free and available to everyone, such as Leicester's Third University¹⁰ and the Really Open University¹¹, should not be seen as competition to other centres of learning. The future of HE will likely include open institutions, just as it will include private providers and corporate-sponsored courses. Alternatives may not currently hand out recognised qualifications or feature in league tables, yet their development may impact wider society just as much as the established universities of today.

It is, therefore, clear that nobody should have a monopoly on education; neither on its purpose, nor on its uses. Removing contradiction only serves to close doors on those who could benefit. Doors need opening, both metaphorically and geographically:

"[Study locations] are not fixed, static, or unchanging. We create the locations we study, and this recognition ought to encourage us to continue to remap the geographies of literacy and cultural forms."¹²

Global diversity is certain to impact students as much as universities. Applicants will make greater personal choices. Traditional school leavers will not treat university as a 'matter of course'. Considerations will go far beyond¹³ gaining a 'good degree'¹⁴.

8 "Towards a pedagogy for a public university", Campaign for the Public University - <http://bit.ly/i9KpLD>

9 <http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/>

10 <http://thirduniversity.wordpress.com/>

11 <http://reallyopenuniversity.wordpress.com/>

12 "Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies", Paul Jay, Cornell University Press, 2010, pp.3-4

13 "English degrees for £27k – who's buying?", John Sutherland, The Guardian, 30 November 2010

14 "Vocational to Higher Education: An International Perspective", Gavin Moodie, Open University

At the same time, we are about to see a steady decline in numbers of 18 to 21 year olds from 2012 onwards. Even in 2010, 35% of students entering HE had no UCAS points¹⁵. Institutions will be forced to cater to a wider base of people than even today. Many will be unable to study within current frameworks. This is an opportunity for further income, not just extra spending.

Preparation is crucial to allow that income, however. The government are working to make more information available and accessible to prospective students. That work must continue, ongoing, to find ways in which that information can be:

1. Translated into something meaningful so as to allow reasoned choice, rather than increase confusion;
2. Distributed effectively to all groups with the express aim that they will actively engage with the detail.

Reay et al highlight the importance of this:

“We found little evidence of the consumer rationalism that predominates in official texts. There were some students who could be described as active researchers... but many relied on serendipity and intuition.”¹⁶

Choice will go way beyond the matter of cost. Much of the recent media storm regarding HE revolved around tuition fees, but debate of good and poor value should not start or end with fees. Value will continue to manifest itself in many other ways: Institutions will look increasingly different; outcomes will be more specific to the individual; vocation and employability will form just one aspect of HE.

Therefore, as HE funding goes through change, so do perceptions of HE. For some, education should be a right at every level of learning. For some, education is for training a future workforce. For some, education is about improving society for the better. For some, education makes sure we all have a future.

If we can successfully embrace contradiction and use it to our advantage, I am confident that the future will be worlds apart, and yet remain both startlingly and reassuringly familiar.

Martin Hughes is a writer, specialising in higher education policy and the student experience. He blogs for students at [TheUniversityBlog](#) and can be found linking all sorts of HE material via Twitter at [@universityboy](#).

Press, 2008, p.6

15 “Higher Education Supply and Demand to 2020”, HEPI, 2011 - <http://bit.ly/hGYrtn>

16 “Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race & Gender in Higher Education”, Diane Reay, Miriam E. David & Stephen Ball, Trentham Books, 2005, p.159