BLUE SKIES

New thinking about the future of higher education

A collection of short articles by leading commentators

UK 2012 edition

Edited by Louis Coiffait

pearsonblueskies.com
thepearsonthinktank.com

The Pearson Think Tank
One90 High Holborn
London, WC1V 7BH
thepearsonthinktank.com
+44 (0)20 7190 4330

References

Whole book

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About the Pearson Think Tank

The Pearson Think Tank is an independent education think tank, focused on the provision of, and access to, high quality education for all. This includes practical research on best practice and education improvement, and on inequalities in educational access and outcomes; as well as consideration of philosophical questions around the nature of quality in education and the principles of social justice. Our thought-leadership draws on robust research to address pressing education policy issues and provide innovative, evidence-based advice to support policymakers and practitioners. Find out more at thepearsonthinktank.com.

Acknowledgements

The Editor would like to thank each of the 2012 contributors for giving up their valuable time and expertise to this project. We are delighted to be able to produce another diverse collection written by such a well-respected group of authors. These articles offer unique perspectives on the future of higher education, showcasing the breadth and depth of opinion across the sector. The Editor is also grateful to Pearson colleagues for their support and advice. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone.

The authors

Liam Burns was elected as NUS UK President for 2011/12, after being elected as Deputy President and President of NUS Scotland. As President of NUS, Liam is responsible for leading on the organisations Priority campaign, calling for reinvestment of public funding in tertiary education and an end to the current tuition fees regime. He grew up in Fife where he attended Glenrothes College. He graduated in Physics at Heriot-Watt University, where he was both the Students' Association Vice-President (Education & Welfare) and subsequently President. Liam has been an Officer within the European Students' Union and has been involved in Quality Assurance processes both on a national and European level through QAA, ENQA and EQAR.

Claire Callender is Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education and at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research focuses on student finances in higher education and related issues, including studies for the most significant UK inquiries into student funding. Claire has given evidence to various House of Commons Education Select Committees and to the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance. Claire was awarded a Fulbright New Century Scholarship, spending time at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Louis Coiffait is Head of Research in the Pearson Think Tank. You can follow him on Twitter at @LouisMMCoiffait or read his blog at http://thepearsonthinktank.com/category/blogs/louis-coiffait/ for education policy comment, research and analysis. He is the Editor of Blue Skies, a growing collection of new thinking about the future of higher education. He also researches a range of other topics including enterprise and entrepreneurship education, careers services and open education data. He is Chair of Governors at an outstanding school in Hackney and runs the social enterprise www.workandteach.co.uk.

John Craig is Managing Partner of the Innovation Unit, where he leads work across public services including education, health, social care, and local government. Before joining the Innovation Unit, he was a policy advisor in the UK government at the Cabinet Office, where he led work on innovation at the Office of the Third Sector, and worked at the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit under the Labour Government. He has also worked as a senior researcher at Demos, the independent think tank, where he focused on policy relating to communities and public services.

Carl Gilleard is Chief Executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR). He has been in the role for nearly fifteen years. Prior to the AGR, Carl was the Executive Director for METRA Services Ltd, a national recruitment consultancy charged with improving the recruitment and retention of graduates into local government, for nine years. He was also joint regional director of the West Midlands Employers Organisation. The earlier part of his career was spent in Education Management and Personnel Work.

AC Grayling is the first Master of New College of the Humanities, and one of Britain's foremost academics and public intellectuals. He has written and edited over 20 books on philosophy and other subjects and is a frequent broadcaster and writer for national newspapers and other publications. He sits on the editorial boards of several academic journals, and for nearly ten years was the Honorary Secretary of the principal British philosophical association, the Aristotelian Society.

John Holmwood is Professor of Sociology in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham. He is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and President of the British Sociological Association. He is co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University (www.publicuniversity.org.uk).

Mark Leach is founder and Editor of wonkhe.com.

Robert Lethbridge is Provost of Gates Cambridge, Master of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge and Hon. Professor of Nineteenth-Century French Literature at the University of Cambridge. He is Emeritus Professor of French Language & Literature in the University of London. Much of his research has been devoted to French Naturalism. He has also taught and published extensively in interdisciplinary perspectives.

Carl Lygo is Chief Executive, BPP Professional Education, and Principal, BPP University College. He is a qualified barrister, having practised in London and Yorkshire, and is also a Professor of Laws. Carl holds a first class undergraduate degree in law, a higher research degree in law and further qualifications in business subjects. Follow him on Twitter at @CarlLygo.

Andrew McGettigan is a freelance researcher. He writes on philosophy, the arts and education. His book for Pluto, 'The Great University Gamble', will appear in Spring 2013. He is the author of the Intergenerational Foundation report, 'False Accounting? Why the government's higher education reforms don't add up'. He is a member of the Campaign for the Public University.

Sarah Porter is JISC's Head of Innovation. Her work involves leading the strategic investment in research projects that promote new uses of technology for the benefit of education and research. Her particular interest is in how technology can help universities to innovate the day-to-day business of education and research – in particular the central importance of technology users, institutional processes and practices – and to help higher education to respond to the ever-changing political, cultural and financial context.

Professor Dominic Shellard became Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer at De Montfort University (DMU) in 2010. Since then, his focus has been on positioning DMU as a university of quality and distinctiveness. A professor of English Literature, he has written extensively on post-war British theatre and is co-founder of the British Library's Theatre Archive Project. He also continues to teach, sharing his enthusiasm with DMU's English literature students.

Dr Graham Spittle CBE is Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at IBM Europe and Chair of the Higher Education Commission's inquiry into the future of postgraduate education. He is a member of the Prime Minister's Council for Science and Technology and served as the first chair of the British government's Technology Strategy Board from 2004 until 2011.

Ken Starkey is Professor of Management and Organisational Learning at Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham. His research interests include leadership and the future of higher education with particular emphasis upon the role of the business school.

Roxanne Stockwell is Managing Director of Pearson's Higher Education Awards division, and Principal of Pearson College. She originally studied Arts/Law at the University of Sydney, and then worked as a lawyer specialising in Intellectual Property and Trusts Law. She is now studying for doctorate in Higher Education Management at the University of Bath.

Dr Tessa Stone is Chief Executive of Brightside, and Chair of the Bridge Group.

John Widdowson CBE is Principal and Chief Executive of New College Durham and is Chair of the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges.

David Wilkinson is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). He specialises in quantitative analytical research focusing on inequalities in education, and labour market disadvantage.

Rt Hon David Willetts MP is Minister for Universities and Science within the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). He is also the Conservative Member of Parliament for Havant and author of The Pinch.

Foreword

Rod Bristow

I'm delighted to be holding another edition of Blue Skies in my hands, it feels like no time at all since I was writing the foreword for the last UK edition. But when I reflect about everything that has happened in the sector over the past year, it is clear that neither the intensity of scrutiny nor the pace of change are letting up at all.

I encourage readers to take the opportunity that Blue Skies gives them to reflect a little on their own views about university, as well as what it must be like for the students and staff who are there now. For the former it must feel like a perfect storm; with increased fees, lower starting salaries and high unemployment. For the staff it must feel like a long journey through rough seas, as institutions respond in a variety of ways to a rapidly changing environment for both funding and policy.

But it's not all gloomy forecasts, even a cursory glance at this year's articles hints at an exciting and sunny future for higher education as it interacts with (and leads) changes in technology and the world of work. Picking up a theme I wrote about last year, it is the modern blurring between working, learning and living that really interests me. At Pearson we endeavour to support people as they make progress in their lives; whether that is through formal education, work-based training, or informal learning just for the pure pleasure of it.

Our commitment to higher education is a long-term one, which explains why Blue Skies is a great platform for transparently debating the issues that really matter – even the more controversial ones. This year's collection of articles has given colleagues and I much to consider, I hope that it will do the same for you and your peers. Please make sure you visit the website, share the articles and videos, and add your own comments to the debate.

Rod Bristow is the President of Pearson UK, with a background in education and publishing.

The Blue Skies project

Louis Coiffait

Blue Skies is intended to provide a non-partisan platform for debate, presenting a wide range of different opinions about the issues and priorities that matter to the future of higher education, both within national boundaries and beyond.

There is at times disagreement about priorities and methods, but common themes do seem evident. Most of our contributors are people and organisations you might expect to hear wise words from about the future of higher education – however some are less well-known, but equally well-placed to comment.

Blue Skies is a deliberate attempt to fundamentally broaden the conversation about higher education, completely re-framing some issues, and to propose a few bold and innovative solutions. By focussing on the future this book forces attention upon the crucial 'so what' questions.

Above all, this book (and the wider project) aims to paint a positive picture for the future of higher education. It draws out the many strengths within the sector, showcases some of the best thinking available, demonstrates the breadth, passion and expertise of the authors, and hopefully provides a useful opportunity for reflection.

Approach

This publication involves a targeted call for contributions, working with leading thinkers in the field to invite short, focussed articles under a broad banner of 'new thinking about the future of higher education'. Editorial influence has been kept to the bare minimum. Views from relevant individuals within Pearson are sometimes included but have been given no special emphasis over others.

Going global

This is the UK 2012 edition of Blue Skies, adding 18 original new articles to the 38 within the initial UK 2011 edition. One particularly exciting new development is the addition of both a Spanish translation of last year's edition and a new Asia Pacific edition for 2012 – including new local authors identified by the regional Pearson office as key thinkers. Over time it is hoped that different editions will come out of other regions and in different years, creating a unique global collection of new ideas about the future of higher education. Changes to pearsonblueskies.com will mean that all of this content, including different languages, can be hosted in one place. This possibility of achieving truly global scale is one of the most exciting and unusual features of the Pearson Think Tank, please take a look at the site and share your views.

A note on language

Higher education, HE, HEIs, universities, college, the academy, tertiary education, academia, higher-level learning, Level Five/Six – call it what you will, in most non-technical uses, these words mean the same thing to the majority of people; courses with typical durations of three to four years, preceded by 13 years of education, including the completion of upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education. Often those using these different words don't appreciate the subtle differences between them. The etymology of the word 'university' reveals its heritage in the classical Greek concept of a 'universal' education, covering a broad array of what we would now call subjects, and often including different types of learning. The word then became more formalised as a type of organisational structure; a corporation, community or association of students, teachers and researchers. More recently, the concept has been broadened further beyond *what* is studied and *where*, to *who* is doing the studying, as demonstrated by modern preoccupations of moving higher education from an elite to a universal service, widening access and driving social mobility. However the issue of language is not a trivial one, for as many of the articles within this collection show, the sometimes simplistic and anachronistic concepts and assumptions used when considering higher education deserve to be challenged at times because they can limit both our understanding and the future opportunities available to us.

How to read Blue Skies

Blue Skies can be read in a number of ways. Cover-to-cover it provides a diverse and thought-provoking tour around the major challenges and opportunities facing the sector. Alternatively the reader can focus on the individual authors and article topics of interest. This year the articles are simply presented alphabetically rather than in different sections, the many cross-cutting and over-lapping themes are grouped on the website using simple tags. Readers are encouraged to visit pearsonblueskies.com as it features even more free content – with summary videos from the authors, comment and share functions, all of the book content in an online format, editions in other languages and from other regions, plus a downloadable PDF of each edition.

Although Blue Skies is always very much 'of the moment' it is also intended to provide lasting value in the future as each edition marks a reference point at a time and place of major change.

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1(R)evolution in higher education?

Louis Coiffait

Are universities currently experiencing an unprecedented volume, velocity and variety of change? And if so how are they reacting now and how should they react in the future? What are the key transformations taking place and are they revolutionary or evolutionary? This editorial reflects on these broad questions through the lessons learned from the articles in this edition, as well as from others across the wider Blue Skies collection and beyond.

In the first fifteen months of the project so far it has been a pleasure and a privilege to help edit 64 different Blue Skies articles, each containing new ideas about the future of higher education. The authors have varied hugely, from country experts across Asia Pacific, to the UK Minister for Higher Education (the only author to write twice), as well as leading academics, student leaders and policy commentators. As one might expect the chosen topics have been highly diverse, and where there has been overlap the opinions expressed have often conflicted. Yet in many ways this broad and mixed range of perspectives somehow epitomises higher education itself, as highlighted in Martin Hughes' article for the 2011 edition about the inevitability (and value) of contradictions within the sector. Although typically the diversity inherent within higher education is seen as a strength, some of this years' authors call for more coherent action at times, especially in the current context of economic duress. Professor Ken Starkey of Nottingham University Business School argues that universities need a new narrative, one that places themselves, rather than banks, as the true engines of growth. Mark Leach of the Wonkhe blog argues for a braver sector, one that encourages policy-makers to consider higher education with a longer-term view and more holistically – within its local, regional, national and international context – so that new policies are better aligned with support from the public and those working in the sector. And Liam Burns, of the UK's National Union of Students (NUS), urges the whole sector to reframe itself, beyond tired old false-dichotomies, by focussing on the idea of 'tertiary' education, encompassing all of the lifelong learning that comes after compulsory schooling. Such 'big ideas' are exactly why the Blue Skies project was started, helping reframe the entire debate about higher education by providing new lenses for analysis. But these three examples also reinforce the sense of strength that comes with such a diverse sector by showing how resourceful and bold it can be, even if contradictorily, they are each calling for a more united front. In addition, it is always interesting to discuss 'change' and higher education, as it both proactively drives change (through thought-leadership and cutting-edge research) at the same time as it reacts to it.

So, bearing in mind these ideas of powerful diversity and leading/reacting to change, the rest of this Editorial will briefly attempt to look at four significant (and inter-related) 'changes' that crop up time and again in Blue Skies articles, reflecting their relevance to the wider sector. The four key issues are; funding, quality, fairness and technology. In each case a cursory attempt will be made to summarise what is happening, how the sector has reacted, how it might react in the future, and the degree to which this is revolutionary or evolutionary.

Funding

The global trend for higher education cost-sharing mix is changing, with the burden overwhelmingly shifting from governments to parents and students (and to some extent businesses and donors e.g. see Professor Robert Lethbridge's article). The UK has just seen one of the biggest such shifts, despite already spending considerably less as a proportion of GDP than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, with levels of public expenditure only higher than one other OECD country, Indonesia. David Willetts, the UK Minister for Higher Education, has defended these developments twice now in Blue Skies. In this edition he argues that the recent tripling of tuition fees is the only sustainable funding option in the long-term, and that it is attracting significant interest from other countries. He believes that competition from new providers and the publishing of more information about courses will together help empower students, helping institutions to focus on the experience that they offer. Both the Minister and Professor Lethbridge also discuss the long-term autonomy that can come from non-public funding sources, though the reality of this is contested by some such as Professor Peter Scott.

Overall, global expenditure on higher education has increased significantly in recent years. From 2000 to 2008, expenditure per student by OECD tertiary education institutions increased by 14 percentage points on average, after having remained stable between 1995 and 2000. The UK is currently spending slightly more than that average at c. £9,800 p.a., a figure that has increased at a faster rate than the OECD average over the last decade. As Professor Sir Tim O'Shea argues, this makes the UK sector relatively efficient, with lower 'transaction costs' meaning that a high proportion of (the relatively low) funding is spent on UK students. However it is unclear if this trend will continue given the ongoing economic woes of many developed nations and a renewed focus on HE costs.

A range of different factors explain these changes to funding trends but the main issue is the differential growth rates between the developing and developed nations, with many of the latter choosing austerity as the route out of recession. However, in many nations there is also a backdrop of increasingly market-friendly liberal (or neo-liberal) economic policies, allowing for the blurring of public and private models, non- and for- profit. There has been significant growth in partnerships with the private sector – both with multinationals and niche, high-value SMEs.

Two articles in this collection also talk about the economic benefits of different delivery modes. Although they are concerned that higher fees will put many off, Professor Claire Callender and David Wilkinson highlight the benefits of part-time study, including better financial returns and international competitiveness. Meanwhile Roxanne Stockwell discusses the pros and cons of two-year degrees, concluding that it seems worthwhile for some providers to experiment with these if they can ensure no dip in quality.

So, do these changes in higher education funding constitute revolution or evolution? Those in the UK may seem to fear the former, but as it turns out the pace of change hasn't survived the politics within the Coalition Government, with the last HE White Paper now unlikely to ever result in a Parliamentary Bill. Tripled student loans also raise fears of over-exposure by the public finances, with student number controls being the primary method of defence. Institutions are responding in a variety of ways, with some slashing staff and courses. Meanwhile fewer mature students are applying, with applications for arts and humanities also down. As yet it's hard to reach a firm conclusion but it's clear that there are unprecedented levels of uncertainty, hampering the ability of both families and institutions to plan for the future.

Quality

A couple of familiar dichotomies arise in this edition under the broad banner of quality; one over existing institutions vs private for-profit providers, and another over a general humanities education vs greater employer involvement. On the first issue Andrew McGettigan picks apart recent UK policy to highlight the risks of private for-profit providers that free-ride on the wider academic community. By contrast Carl Lygo of BPP lists the benefits of new private providers; bringing the latest technology and new levels of flexibility. On the second issue, AC Grayling reiterates the importance of a general humanities education for dealing with an increasingly complex world. Graham Spittle and Carl Gilleard take quite different angles, emphasising the importance of strong business links and more employer-focussed degree classifications respectively.

The role of private providers and employers are hot-button issues all around the world, especially when finances are tight and competitiveness is key. Despite a backlash in many quarters, these trends are likely to continue. But are they really revolutionary? They certainly are not new, harking back to fundamental questions about what university is for and who it serves. As ever the answers are not simple, with the sector serving a multitude of masters and purposes. The key indicators to watch are the course choices of applicants, the destinations of those who graduate from different institutions and courses, as well as softer measures such as wellbeing. The importance of recent changes will only truly become apparent by monitoring these over time, with revolution seemingly feared and hoped for in equal measure by different stakeholders. Personally I'm confident that the sector will continue to maintain a focus on high quality provision and that this will help dictate the pace and degree of change – rather than the reverse.

Fairness

Social mobility and fairness also remain key issues in HE, especially in the UK. To some the sector is a launch-pad that enables the disadvantaged to improve their situation. For others it is an elitist ivory tower that cements advantage over time. Some claim the gates are being opened wider with more funding than ever for disadvantaged applicants, while others see a sector that badly needs to do better. Tessa Stone of the Bridge Group argues that the guidance offered to applicants is patchy and often poor, with variable and confusing admissions policies that rarely make enough use of valuable contextual data. John Holmwood posits that recent changes in the UK will only embed inequality further, while John Widdowson demands a more holistic system that incorporates mature students, lifelong learning and portfolio careers. John Craig and Dominic Shellard take a different angle, using the example of De Montford University to show how better local engagement can benefit staff, students and communities.

The typically widening socio-economic gaps, both between and within countries, are a real cause for concern. It is clear to me that higher education has to play its part and can do more than it has to date. Arguments about excellence and global competition do not seem sufficient if fairness is forgotten. Similarly, placing the blame at the door of schools and pre-university education feels like a cop-out. Some warn than the latest UK reforms risk reversing the recent gains made in widening participation, whereas others see this as a necessary re-balancing after an inefficient dilution of the HE offer. Given high rates of unemployment in many nations this issue is only likely to increase in importance, though sadly the true revolution that many hope for currently feels unaffordable.

Technology

To many it is technology that might hold the key to solving the other three issues. Sarah Porter reminds us that the technological revolution in HE is only just beginning, with far more change on the way. Both teaching staff and students are becoming better connected than ever before, making both learning and researching an increasingly social enterprise, taking place far beyond traditional lecture halls and labs. A key outcome of these developments will be a huge increase in the data produced by higher education, in ever more open and accessible formats. This will include linked data about research, learning resources, the curriculum taught, assessment, achievement and performance. Although we are currently data rich and analysis poor this situation will begin to change, as new technologies, systems and training help us capitalise on this wealth of data in ways we cannot yet imagine. Learning will become more personalised and achieve better outcomes than ever before – as hinted at by some of the early studies into the 'flipped classrooms' and open resource initiatives taking place at Harvard, MIT, Stanford and others. There is also going to be a boom in 'virtual campuses', as we become more accustomed to learning together virtually, not just in-person. These changes will not only have an impact on accountability by informing policy and practice with better evidence, but will allow for real progress in terms of efficiency and innovation. Despite some fears of a two-tier system, this has the potential to dramatically improve access and equity, offering high quality higher education for all, in a cost-effective way. Although hyperbole is rife at the moment as we seem to be entering an #edtech bubble, it is technology that promises to ultimately be the most revolutionary change for higher education.

Hopefully, this brief discussion of the above four 'major changes' taking place across higher education helps to broaden perspectives and places the articles within this volume within a wider context. I would argue that universities are facing a unique confluence of trends at the same time, creating an unprecedented 'inflection point'. At times the hype of revolution will not filter through to reality, but it is clear that debating these issues is vital as the decisions made now will determine future success. Hopefully this new collection provides a platform for that debate, stimulating new thinking about the future of HE.

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Louis Coiffait *is Head of Research in the Pearson Think Tank. You can follow him on Twitter at @LouisMMCoiffait or read his blog at* http://thepearsonthinktank.com/category/blogs/louis-coiffait/ *for education policy comment, research and analysis. He is the Editor of Blue Skies, a growing collection of new thinking about the future of higher education. He also researches a range of other topics including enterprise and entrepreneurship education, careers services and open education data. He is Chair of Governors at an outstanding school in Hackney and runs the social enterprise* www.workandteach.co.uk.

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Higher humanities education in the 21st Century

AC Grayling

There will always be a significant need for higher education to produce the technical and vocational experts whose presence is essential in advanced economies. Scientists, engineers, doctors and lawyers are indispensable, so universities will always train such professionals because there will always be the resources for training them. The necessary funding either comes from individuals themselves who are confident of the return on investment involved (as in the US), or by taxpayers who are similarly (if indirectly) confident, as is still the case in the UK for science, technology and medicine.

However, among both individuals and policymakers there is a curious blindness to the equally great need in our complex societies for generalists. Further, there is a related blindness to the need for educational generalism itself, as one of the richest possibilities for people to be more than just cogs in the economic machine. It should be the baldest truism to say that people are not merely units of resource on balance sheets, but alas that is exactly how they are being treated in the planning and financing of higher education in too many parts of the developed world. That is why it is necessary to remind ourselves, loudly and insistently, that people are also voters, neighbours, friends, lovers, parents, travellers, makers of choices, deciders about matters of human as well as economic significance. People have to be capable of understanding and engaging with a globalised, complicated world, to be equipped to overcome the human propensity for tribalism, limitation, and self-interested short-termism.

The generalism in question is provided by the humanities. By 'humanities' I mean history, literature, philosophy, politics, classics, languages, and those areas of the social sciences – economics, anthropology, psychology and sociology – which relate directly to the exploration and understanding of human nature and the human condition.

It takes little imagination to see how study of these pursuits can widen the horizons and deepen the insight of anyone who studies them attentively. They introduce perspectives, experiences, distillations of wisdom and observation, challenges, thought-provoking questions, new opinions, assumptions and outlooks, that must healthily influence any mind that contemplates them. I say 'healthily' because all these things militate against the unhealthy human propensities mentioned above. Those propensities motivate divisions and conflicts. The broadened sympathies of educated minds is a countervailing force.

It is obvious enough that attentive study of these pursuits provides the materials for individual lives to be well-lived in themselves. This is no small matter. Fulfilled people with alert, outward-looking interests and understanding are always going to be a civilising influence in the world. But study of the humanities also – and this is an important point to raise with those for whom only economic considerations justify education – provides the basis for successful workplace careers. It does this because the humanities equip their students with two invaluable possessions: an overview of human affairs whose lessons and examples can be applied to new circumstances and in response to new challenges; and a capacity to think – really, genuinely think – which among many other things means an ability to handle and evaluate ideas and information, to solve problems, to apply the lessons of experience, to see new opportunities, to innovate, and to lead.

Study of the humanities has indeed always had the role of providing thought-leaders and people-leaders in society. To study the humanities is to study the example and insights of our forebears in the great human story. For example consider the lessons taught by history and literature, and the analyses offered by philosophy and psychology. The process of studying these subjects demands the acquisition and honing of a repertoire of intellectual skills of great value. Admittedly, university dons have too often assumed that the process of study by itself would result in the absorption by osmosis of these skills; it has now to be realised that the skills themselves have to be more consciously acquired; but that is an adjustment easily made.

It has become a commonplace, but no less true for being one, to say that in a rapidly changing world one of the fundamental purposes of education has to be to render people fit to deal with unpredictable changes and challenges. This includes having to compete in a global economy. In all the identities people have, whether as individuals, as citizens (of the world as well as of a particular state), and as workers in whatever field, they more than ever need flexible, alert and well-informed minds, otherwise they will fall behind and end by playing a passive rather than active part in the tumultuous and noisy events that characterize our contemporary world. This is the opposite of what people would wish for themselves, or that we would wish for our fellows; so, given that education is the great resource for enabling people to be actors in their own lives rather than victims of life in general, we have to ensure that real education continues to be available.

The liberal arts model in US colleges and universities is the right one for the purpose outlined here. However, higher education in the UK – indeed education in general – is far too narrow and becomes over-specialised far too early. As the realisation grows that our world needs general humanities education as much as it needs specialist technical education, so the liberal arts model will grow internationally and become the prevailing one; of that I am morally certain.

At present, it must be admitted, the trends appear to run in the opposite direction: witness the British government's abolition of all teaching subsidy for humanities and social sciences in universities, and the scale of the switch by prospective students to courses of study that they think will give them advantages in the workplace. But this will prove a short-term blip. For all that we humans are capable of great folly, we are not so foolish as to fail to recognise what our real needs are, individually and socially: and that is for what feeds mind and spirit as well as job vacancies.

AC Grayling is the first Master of New College of the Humanities, and one of Britain's foremost academics and public intellectuals. He has written and edited over 20 books on philosophy and other subjects and is a frequent broadcaster and writer for national newspapers and other publications. He sits on the editorial boards of several academic journals, and for nearly ten years was the Honorary Secretary of the principal British philosophical association, the Aristotelian Society.

New College of the Humanities (NCH), which opens this September, offers a new model of higher education for the humanities in the UK. NCH students will have one of the best staff–student ratios in UK higher education and will benefit from a high number of contact hours as well as engaging and challenging weekly one-to-one tutorials. NCH will prepare students for undergraduate degrees in Economics BSc, English BA, History BA, Law LLB and Philosophy BA.

3

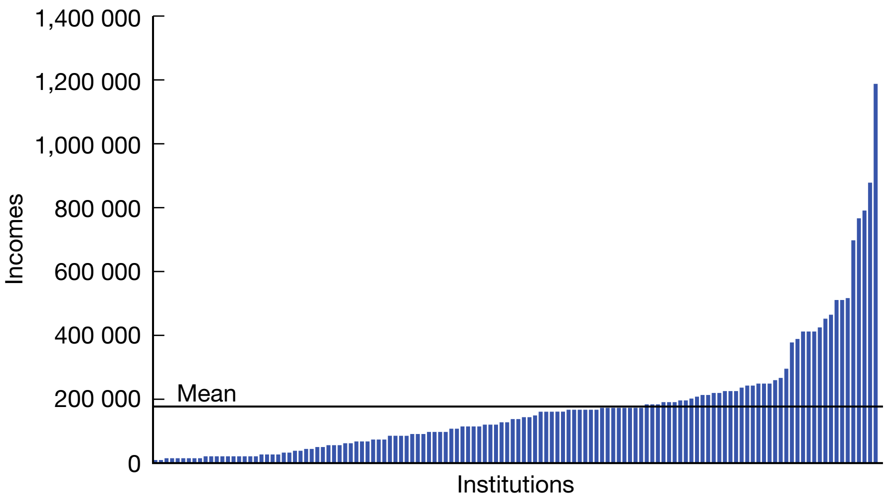
Academics and standards: avoiding market failure

Andrew McGettigan

Can academic standards be ensured without a central role for academics? Not according to the current regulations governing Degree Awarding Powers.[1] Proposals to amend these rules so as to allow for more diversity amongst providers put quality at risk.

The government's reforms of the higher education (HE) sector in England, if allowed to proceed in their current 'direction of travel', will exacerbate the disparities already seen between institutions. Resources will increasingly gravitate towards the small group of universities clustered to the right hand side of the chart below.

Distribution of higher education institution (HEI) incomes in England, 2009–10[2]



'Excellence' will be protected and lead to a greater monopoly by the Russell Group of elite research-intensive universities plus a handful of others. What we will see will resemble what happened to English football after the formation of the Premier League in 1992 – but without relegation or promotion.

For those institutions hovering around the mean annual income of £170million, which also lack any significant endowments or wealth, the new market conditions will have a more challenging impact, threatening course diversity, quality and even viability.

All along, following the recommendations of think tanks, such as Policy Exchange, and a range of private sector lobbyists, the government has been aiming to create a 'level playing field' for a range of alternative, commercial operations. So far this has been achieved in steps.

First, all of the 'block teaching grant' to established institutions in receipt of public funding was removed for subjects where 'new providers' can most easily compete. As David Willetts, UK Minister for Universities and Science, declared to assembled Vice-Chancellors in early 2011:

> *'Currently, one of the main barriers to alternative providers is the teaching grant we pay to publicly-funded HEIs. This enables HEIs to charge fees at a level that private providers could not match, and so gives publicly-funded HEIs a significant advantage. Our funding reforms will remove this barrier, because all HEIs will – in future – receive most of their income from students via fees. This reform, of itself, opens up the system.'*[3]

Second, access to loans for fees and maintenance has been extended widely and rapidly, including to students at those same private providers. More than 150 institutions now have courses with 'designated' status, which will, from 2012/13, enable their students to borrow up to £6,000 per year towards fees from the public purse. Maintenance grants and loans are available to those students on the same terms as those at established institutions. I and others argue that companies that distribute profits should not have access to the publicly funded Student Loan Company (SLC) at all.

Third, the legally protected title of 'university' is now available to institutions with only 1,000 full-time equivalent HE students. This represents a significant reduction in the current criterion which specifies a minimum of 4,000 students.

Fourth, the 2012 Budget outlined plans to include commercial operations in the value-added tax (VAT) exemption on tuition fees enjoyed by charitable universities and colleges.

I contest that this is all consistent with the UK Coalition government's overriding objective – using the resulting competition to reduce the cost of higher education to the public sector finances. As stated, a minority of elite institutions will be protected, while the 'mass' HE system will be disciplined by a new market.

Many of the 'new providers' benefiting from these changes are meant to be cheaper, undercutting the middle tier of institutions and forcing such institutions to reduce fees or to go out of business. Paragraph 6.9 of the 2011 White Paper states the UK government's intention to no longer act as the backer of last resort for public universities.

The vision of those hundred or so 'designated institutions' joining the fight for market share, while overall student numbers are capped, is not a pleasant one. This is a zero sum game. A saturated market of providers where applicants are at risk of being swamped by the available information and thereby failing to become informed consumers.

Combined with increasing examples of 'degree mills', where the senior institution in a partnership is more concerned with the fees received than the quality of the award programme, and the advent of mass online HE provision (a coming 'tech disruption'), we are faced with a looming issue of quality control. The higher cost of established courses may drive some students towards cheap provision rather than the education best suited to them. The matter is not helped by the government's apparent desire to erode any distinction between commercial training and undergraduate degrees.

Given the kind of economic 'good' HE is, diversity and choice are not sufficient to avoid various inefficiencies and market failures. With no normal pricing signals, prestige and brand strength are proxies for teaching quality. Recruitment and marketing will inevitably absorb a greater percentage of resources.

With all market entry barriers removed, the government's reckless policy-making would be inviting a sub-prime style degree scandal. Indicatively, over the 2011–12 holiday period, the government rushed out a belated tender to conduct a survey of the private providers offering HE in England. Were we dealing with a well-planned and thoughtful expansion, such due diligence would have surely been conducted in advance.

Thankfully, the government's formal response to the consultations run on the back of the 2011 Higher Education White Paper has refrained from removing the main defence of standards. David Willetts had previously advocated extending degree awarding powers to bodies that do no teaching; specifically he had referenced 'BTEC degrees' thereby nominating Pearson as the initial beneficiary of this change. Writing in the 2011 *Blue Skies*, he pledged to end the 'fixed, yet illogical, link between degree-awarding powers and teaching'.

There is nothing 'illogical' in the current criteria since full 'public confidence' in degree quality depends on a central role for *academics*. Any institution with powers to award degrees must be able to demonstrate: 'a well found[ed], cohesive and self-critical academic community that demonstrates firm guardianship of its standards'. This is the *sine qua non* of quality assurance.

Although the 'Technical Consultation' on the proposed regulatory framework promised to remove all 'barriers to non-teaching bodies', the weight of feedback on those proposals has caused the government to pause.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which has responsibility for degree standards, told the government that their plans would require a change in legislation, while two thirds of respondents overall indicated that there were serious obstacles. Notably the current requirement that: 'It is particularly important that teaching is carried out by staff *who are active and recognised participants in research and/or advanced scholarship*.' [my italics] This is the standard expected of all, including those on 'teaching only' contracts.

Non-teaching bodies would have no academics and therefore no staff reaching this standard which is determined by the community.[4] With no active relation to research or scholarship (that is, producing none of their own), non-teaching bodies would be freeloading off the research produced by other institutions: plagiarising course content to commercial ends and effectively breaking the collegial pact on which the reproduction of academic and intellectual life depends. The relation would be one of parasite to host, not symbiotic.

Burdened by an unviable funding regime, the government was keen to see a low-cost product that could be rolled out in cheap mass provision to go beyond the current 'partnership' arrangements, which are riven by conflicts of interest in the new terrain. Now that it has admitted that it does not know what its market reforms will do, the UK government should use the pause to reconsider any pursuit legislative change.[5] Its rushed and botched agenda threatens degree quality. When combined with the potential proprietary architecture (textbook publishing, learning management systems, media content packages, etc.) and deep pockets of a few new providers, there is potential for serious damage to the sector.

The University of Cambridge's official response to the White Paper concluded:

> *'There is a serious long-term risk that new providers will be prepared to operate initially at a loss to take market share from some universities that will then become unviable. In many cases, this would be to the detriment of local and regional communities who would then lose the wider benefits that a local university with its diverse range of activities can provide (and which new operators without the same roots in local communities are unlikely or unwilling to provide). … We could then be left with a depleted university sector and damaged communities.'*[6]

Pearson has a market capitalisation somewhere in the region of $10billion and to some it represents precisely the risks described by Cambridge. Even if such under-cutting is not its short-term intention, without a central role for academics, quality is jeopardised.

The government cannot solve the problem of its unviable funding regime through this manner of competition. Such creative destruction will only spill over into more profound problems: the loss of infrastructure and long-term damage to the sector's international reputation. Whatever the merits of the market reforms, the best defence of quality in provision is an enhanced regulatory structure that enables *academics* to perform their core function of protecting standards.

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2 David Willetts, Speech to the Universities UK Spring Conference, 25 February 2011, Woburn House, London. Available at: http://goo.gl/PdF8y.

3 Standards for external degree programmes are supported by the academics employed within the university concerned. For example, the University of London International Programme depends on the academics at its constituent colleges.

4 Government response to the consultations 'Students at the Heart of the System' and 'A new fit for purpose regulatory framework for the higher education sector', June 2012, p.4, 'The White Paper set out proposals for primary legislation to create a new regulatory framework. Many responses to the White Paper stressed that we do not yet know the full effect of the new funding arrangements. Hence, it cannot be clear what form of regulatory framework will be appropriate. We will therefore not at this stage be seeking to introduce changes to primary legislation, but will move our reform agenda forward primarily through non-legislative means. We will keep this situation under review.' Available at: http://goo.gl/MJMKK.

5 Council of the University of Cambridge 'Response to the Consultation', 26 September 2011. Available at: http://goo.gl/SoIAb.

Andrew McGettigan *is a freelance researcher. He writes on philosophy, the arts and education. His book for Pluto, 'The Great University Gamble', will appear in Spring 2013. He is the author of the Intergenerational Foundation report, 'False Accounting? Why the government's higher education reforms don't add up'. He is a member of the Campaign for the Public University.*

4

Degree classification for the 21st Century

Carl Gilleard

A university education is greater than the sum of its parts: not just a series of course options, but a challenge to think about the connections between these elements; not merely a chance to make friends for life, but an opportunity to work alongside peers in teams that thrive on diversity; a time for indulging one's thirst for knowledge and preparing for a fulfilling career.

The UK Honours degree is a robust qualification which garners worldwide respect; however, we are betraying our graduates by leaving them with nothing but a blunt degree classification with which to express their attainment. The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) has consistently supported the development of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), due to be issued to graduates across the UK higher education sector from the academic year 2012–13.

The HEAR is intended to give a broader and more balanced picture of a graduate's achievements, including a full transcript of results for all modules, and a record of extra-curricular involvement such as the students' union, societies and sports clubs. It is very encouraging that more than 80 institutions are now operating or introducing the HEAR, and I believe that more and more employers will come to use this in their recruitment, with positive outcomes for both graduates and recruiters.

Graduates in the 21st century are expected to demonstrate a myriad of skills and understanding beyond their academic subject; recruiters are increasingly striving to find ways to assess candidates on such abstract characteristics as ambition, or self awareness. It is clear that whilst academic endeavour results in significant intellectual development, there are also a myriad of 'soft skills' which are highly valued by employers, and which are developed outside the lecture hall, library or seminar room.

As recruiters become increasingly creative in their attempts to capture and assess these significant yet abstract personal attributes, applicants for graduate schemes can expect to be put through their paces in selection processes which may have five stages or more a system which is gruelling for graduates and cost-heavy for organisations, and which could be slimmed-down if recruiters were provided with more detailed graduate profiles by universities in the first instance.

As tuition fees increase, two year degrees are a tempting option, but in my opinion these condensed courses do not allow enough time for students to mature, pursue a range of extra-curricular interests or develop the skills required in the workplace. It would be a great shame if students on two year courses finished this whistle-stop tour of higher education having sacrificed personal development to academic achievement.

However, many students sense that academic achievement – boiling down to a 1st, 2:1, 2:2 and beyond – can make or break their first job applications. Final exams loom large, and results day can be traumatic: the University of Oxford has recently complained of an increase in students – and 'pushy parents' – demanding that their exams be re-marked. Pushiness aside, this reveals students' frustration at the fact that three or four years of work should come down to one number, and to the crucial distinction between classes of degree.

It seems nonsensical that two fellow graduates should have the same 2:1 degree class prominently placed at the top of their CVs, even if one has attained an overall mark of nearly ten percentage points higher than the other. An English Literature student who has obtained a high 2:1 whilst complementing study through student journalism or drama should have a standardised and official way of distinguishing him or herself from a classmate who has scraped a 2:1 and failed to contribute to university life.

It is no wonder that graduates become fixated on degree classification, since recruiters often rely on the 2:1 as a cut-off point in sifting through the increasing number of graduates competing for each job. Ironically, however, employers must question what these classifications truly prove as the percentage of students being awarded a 1st or 2:1 increases year-on-year. Hard-working graduates deserve a degree classification which means more.

Meanwhile, increasing competition for jobs, and the lack of a standard system which expresses the non-academic achievements of our graduates, is apparently leading to 'CV fraud', with Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announcing recently funding for a service which will provide degree checks on candidates.

Whereas CVs might once have been bolstered with unverifiable extra-curricular activities, the HEAR will ensure reliability and clarity. The hours put into extra-curricular experiences such as editing a student newspaper, captaining a university team or acting as treasurer for a society will be recorded, verified and recognised. And it is my hope that giving graduates the chance to make the most of the extra-curricular experience which they have gained during education will end the premium on unpaid work experience and internships post-university (which can have a negative impact on social mobility).

The HEAR has the potential to change graduate recruitment for the better as employers become less dependent on the degree classifications that many acknowledge to be unfit for purpose. In defining 'quality' in higher education, we look at intellectual enjoyment and attainment, but also consider students' opportunities to prepare for a fulfilling career. It makes complete sense, therefore, that recruiters should have a verified and standardised tool that enables them to get a clear picture of a candidate's quality along these diverse lines – not just demonstrating academic achievement, but showing their readiness for the world of work, ability to contribute to a team, and awareness of the way organisations function. As tuition fees increase, students deserve a system that reflects not just hours in the library in the lead-up to exams, but also the many other elements of university life.

__Carl Gilleard__ is Chief Executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR). He has been in the role for nearly fifteen years. Prior to the AGR, Carl was the Executive Director for METRA Services Ltd, a national recruitment consultancy charged with improving the recruitment and retention of graduates into local government, for nine years. He was also joint regional director of the West Midlands Employers Organisation. The earlier part of his career was spent in Education Management and Personnel Work.

The __Association of Graduate Recruiters__ (AGR) is the recognised national voice for all UK employers involved in graduate recruitment. The AGR has 750 members from both the public and private sectors.

5

A private education in times of austerity?

Carl Lygo

We are seeing a tremendous demand for quality university education worldwide but a serious lack of global supply, just as new technologies are improving access to such quality education. In 2000 it was estimated that globally there were 97.3 million students in higher education; by 2012 this had reached over 150 million and some predictions suggest there will be as many as 300 million students by 2025[1]. It is amazing to think that by 2020, four countries will account for over 50% of the world's 18–22 year old population: India, China, USA and Indonesia. In times of economic austerity for many governments, how do we respond to this seismic shift?

The private sector has an answer to provide flexible quality access to higher education on a large scale.

In the UK we get tied up with the notion that there are too many people going to university and too many of them are studying 'worthless' degree subjects. Surveys[2] suggest that as many as one in three graduates wish they had studied something more work relevant whilst at university. Yet in the midst of a recession the number of 16–21 year olds not in employment, education or training (NEET) has peaked in the UK at over one million. Other European countries have a similar problem, for example Spain and Greece have youth unemployment rates in excess of 50%. Yet the demand for higher education is there and growing. José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission said, 'we see in Europe the number of skilled jobs outnumbering the supply of students with higher education qualifications.' In the UK, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has predicted that by 2017, 56% more jobs will require degree level skills and 12% fewer jobs will require no qualifications at all. The University Alliance undertook a study in 2012 called 'The way we'll work: labour market trends and preparing for the hourglass' which found that 75% of the employment growth between 2000-2010 was in jobs requiring a degree. It also found that 80% of the new jobs created in 2010 in the UK went to people who were not born in the UK. It seems that jobs are becoming more demanding of graduate level skills and that the world is overtaking the UK. For example, in 2000 the UK was third amongst top industrialised nations in terms of the proportion of young

[1] See for example 'University World News' Issue No. 209 19/2/12, 'Higher Education to 2030 Vol I' OECD and 'Vision 2020, Forecasting International Student Mobility' British Council

[2] See for example CIPD Annual Survey, Learning & Talent Development Report

people graduating. In the latest data available from the OECD the UK has fallen to ninth position. Meanwhile developing nations are increasing their investment in higher education, for instance in the last 15 years China has more than doubled the number of its higher education institutions from 1,022 to 2,263. More than five million Chinese students enrol on degree courses now, compared to one million in 1997.

Similarly, the Indian Government is seeking to upskill 500 million people and increase higher education participation rates from 10% to 30% within one decade. So can the UK afford to respond to this seismic shift by returning to a time when only 5% of the population were privileged enough to go on to university? Clearly not: the world is a different place and to compete in a world economy each country needs a skilled workforce to drive innovation.

The world needs greater access to quality higher education, something governments alone cannot afford to fund and develop. Inevitably this means that private universities fill the gap and that is why the UK's influential Higher Educational Policy Institute (HEPI) reported in 2011 that 'throughout the world, the number of students in private institutions is growing faster than in publicly owned and funded ones.' In fact the majority of higher education institutes in the world are private, with HEPI finding that 'world-wide private institutions outnumber public ones – 30,555 private HEI's (Higher Education Institutions) representing 55.7% of total worldwide HEI provision'[3].

The average private HEI tends to be less than 1,000 students and focused on niche areas, usually career focussed or concentrating upon a particular interest group such as the arts or humanities. In the UK, since the middle of the last decade reforms were introduced to allow private HEI's to become degree awarding bodies. Five high quality organisations have gained degree awarding powers so far and together with the wider UK private sector represent the fastest growing providers of domestic undergraduate provision. They offer degree programmes that are closely aligned to the world of work, created in conjunction with employers and professional bodies. Often these programmes are taught by seasoned professionals who have had direct experience of their subject matter in practice and not just an experience vicariously learnt through research. The private HEIs have looked for innovative ways to deliver a quality educational experience to students. For example, traditional UK universities have taught over three academic years with the teaching terms in each year lasting as little as 24 calendar weeks. Private HEIs have looked at this model and have offered students the ability to study the 72 weeks within two calendar years. This reduces the cost to the student, since they are not out of the job market for three years nor are they racking up additional student living expenses.

[3] Higher Education Policy Institute, 'Private Providers in Higher Education' 2010 Middlehurst & Felden citing PROPHE (2010). Public and private higher education shares for 117 countries, 2001-2009 (updated November 2010).

In the last decade social media innovations such as Facebook, Twitter, and Skype have really started to come of age. Apple has revolutionised the devices we use to access the Internet with its iPad and iPhone. These technologies offer HEIs the opportunity to reach a much wider audience than the lecture theatre, first invented by Socrates, which has dominated the delivery of higher education over the last 2,000 years.

Private HEIs have been nimble and commercially minded enough to see how these technologies can be quickly deployed to give students greater access to quality education. They have also kept abreast of the way young people may want to further their careers – as our case study below shows.

CASE STUDY

Extract from the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 8 March 2012

Nineteen-year-old Kathryn Hunt left school last summer with an A and four A* grades at A level. She'd originally planned to go to Durham University to study history, but following talks with her school's careers service and Connexions, she found out about an opportunity at a local law firm.

She started work there last autumn and the firm is sponsoring her part-time law degree at BPP University College, Manchester. She works four days a week at the firm and spends the fifth day at university. She will still complete her degree in three years, as she works through the normal university holidays and during evenings. She said:

> *'It is fantastic. Obviously, there is a lot of work in the evening, but the opportunities it has given me are brilliant. I am so glad I have done it. I thought I might miss out on university life, but this is the best of both worlds and I am learning so much quicker on the job.'*

Not everybody necessarily wants to embark on the traditional full-time study route. By embracing technology, and providing flexibility, these institutions enable students to study part-time whilst living at home, fitting study in around their busy lives, without needing to face the cost either financially or in the time travelling to the educational experts at a university campus. Now the campus can come to you wherever you are and at whatever time you need it. Such provision might not be for everyone but more than ever it is making it possible to access quality higher education and help grow the world economy.

__Carl Lygo__ is Chief Executive, BPP Professional Education, and Principal, BPP University College. He is a qualified barrister, having practised in London and Yorkshire, and is also a Professor of Laws. Carl holds a first class undergraduate degree in law, a higher research degree in law and further qualifications in business subjects. Follow him on Twitter at @ CarlLygo.

__BPP__ is a leading European private education and training provider in the fields of business, law, finance, tax and accountancy. BPP University College of Professional Studies has over 6,500 students at its UK law and business schools, and trains over 30,000 accountants. Its programmes cover undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, MBAs, short courses, summer schools, training and ongoing development for professionals. In 2009, BPP became part of the Apollo Group. Find out more at www.bpp.com.

6

Onwards and upwards: the benefits of part-time study

Claire Callender and David Wilkinson

In 2008, 31% of the UK workforce had a Level 4 qualification or above, placing the UK in 12th position in international rankings (UKCES, 2010). To improve the UK's competitiveness and its economic strength, this proportion needs to increase and the workforces' skill levels raised. Part-time higher education (HE) study has a particularly significant role to play now and in the future in raising, updating, and improving the skill levels of people already in employment, ensuring they possess the skills and qualifications required by employers. It can help to fill skill gaps, and by combining work experience with study, it can increase the supply of highly-educated people with the types of 'employability skills' widely sought by employers. Another attraction is that part-time study minimises absence from work, with individuals investing their own time in work-related study (Mason and Hopkin, 2011).

In addition, as the 2011 UK White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (BIS, 2011) confirms, part-time study can further the government's wider HE policy objectives and is integral to their vision of the future of HE. It can provide educational opportunities throughout people's lives, increase social mobility, and help create a more diverse and responsive HE sector while giving students greater choice and enhancing their HE experience. To make part-time HE more affordable and accessible, for the first time part-time undergraduates in England will be eligible for student loans to cover the costs of their tuition fees. Consequently, twice as many – around a third – of part-time undergraduates will qualify for government-funded financial support from 2012–13.

However, just increasing the proportion of the working population with an HE qualification may not necessarily meet our skills needs. As a recent OECD (2012) report reminds us, skills need to be used effectively and bring real, sustainable benefits to the individuals concerned. Indeed, the UK Commission on Employment and Skills (UKCES) argues: 'Skill acquisition which does not enhance employability, earnings, labour market progression or which does not bring other economic and social returns, is a waste of public and private resources' (UKCES, 2010 p.109).

Yet a review of existing research on the benefits of part-time HE published since 1999 noted that 'research on the impacts of part-time study on graduates and any benefits that accrue to the individual or society...is still rare' (Bennion et al, 2011 p.150). To help fill this gap, we undertook a study for UKCES to explore the impact of HE study for part-time students in the UK (Callender and Wilkinson, 2011). We analysed the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) data from the Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey which follows up full- and part-time undergraduates six months and 3½ years after graduation. We aimed to compare the labour market experiences of graduates of part-time study with those of full-time study focussing on employability, earnings, and labour market progression. Here we concentrate on the outcomes 3½ years after graduation for 3,800 part-timers and 26,330 full-timers.A third of all UK undergraduates study part-time and our analysis took into account their characteristics. Part-timers are very different from full-timers and more heterogeneous. The majority are older and women who are employed full-time and have family commitments. Most do not study for a bachelor's degree as full-timers do, but take vocationally orientated and professional qualifications. Unlike full-time undergraduates who typically enter HE with A Levels (Level 3 qualifications), part-timers' entry qualifications are polarised. A high proportion have prior experience of HE, already hold a Bachelor's degree, and are re-skilling, often with financial support from their employer. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a substantial minority have no or low-level entry qualifications. They are up-skilling and taking advantage of 'second chance' learning opportunities, which they pay for themselves or sometimes with government-funded financial support. However, irrespective of whether part-time undergraduates are re-skilling or up-skilling most want an HE qualification to get ahead and to meet their career ambitions (Callender et al, 2010).

So what are the effects of HE on graduate employment and what are the differences between those that studied part- or full-time? Our analysis shows that the same proportion of graduates from part- and from full-time study are employed (88%) or unemployed (3%) 3½ years after graduation. However, part-time study is less likely than full-time study to help unemployed job seekers back into work.

The majority of UK graduates, irrespective of their mode of study while undergraduates, are employed in the top three occupation categories (Managers and Senior Officials, Professional occupations, and Associate Professional and Technical occupations) 3½ years after graduation (77% of graduates from part-time study compared with 73% from full-time study). However, a much higher proportion of graduates from part- than full-time study work in the public rather than the private sector (59% compared with 44%), and have permanent jobs (87% compared with 79%) 3½ years after leaving HE.

Graduates' levels of employment vary by their characteristics. For instance, older graduates are less likely to be employed than younger graduates 3½ years after graduation. However, within different age bands, the employment rates of graduates do not differ by their mode of study. This is also true for different motivations to study. Employment rates, however, do differ by mode of study for graduates with different levels of entry qualifications. Significantly, graduates from part-time study with high-level entry qualifications, who are mainly re-skilling, and those with low-level entry qualifications, who are primarily up-skilling, have higher employment rates 3½ years after graduation than similar graduates from full-time study.

Turning to graduates' earnings, those in full-time employment graduating from part-time study earn more on average than similar graduates from full-time study, especially if they are older and received government help with their fees whilst studying (mostly low-income students). So, 3½ years after leaving HE, 84% of part-time graduates earn more than £20,000 compared with 73% of full-time graduates. However, between six months and 3½ years after graduation, their salaries grow at a slower pace compared with their full-time peers. But part-timers who received help with their fees from the government or their employer whilst studying are more likely to see their pay rise than similar full-time graduates.

Our findings confirm the very real benefits of part-time HE study for individuals, employers, and society. Part-time study helps meet the UK government's skills agenda while also contributing to their HE policy objectives. Our findings also show the positive impact of making part-time study more affordable and the wisdom of improving access to, and the level of, financial support for part-time study, especially for low-income individuals with low-level qualifications that wish to upskill.

The government intends to do this by introducing student loans to cover the tuition fees of part-time students from 2012–13. These loans are based on the idea that those who benefit from HE should contribute towards its costs, and on assumptions about the private returns of HE in terms of employment prospects and higher wages on graduation.

Our findings suggest that student loans for part-time students are justified in terms of: the private and public returns to such an investment including the higher employment rates of part-time graduates without a Level 3 qualification compared with similar full-time peers; the increased productivity of low-income employees as measured by the higher pay levels and pay progression of those in receipt of government-funded awards; and on the grounds of equity by increasing social mobility both for those entering part-time study with low-level qualifications and for those with low-incomes in receipt of government-funded fee awards.

The higher pay levels of graduates from part-time study suggest that they are likely to repay their student loans at a faster rate than graduates from full-time study, and to pay higher interest rates. Both will benefit the Exchequer and make loans for part-timers potentially cheaper for the public purse than those for full-time students.

However, we must not forget that only a third of part-time students will qualify for these loans – only those who do not already have a degree or Level 3 qualification and are studying at least 25% of a full-time course. At the same time, from 2012–13, there will be a threefold increase in most part-time tuition fees. We do know what impact these changes will have on the demand for part-time study. Particularly vulnerable is demand amongst the majority of would-be part-time students, especially those who are re-skilling, who neither qualify for loans nor receive financial support from their employer with their tuition fees. These students will be faced with fees of up to £6,750 a year, which they will have to pay upfront and out of their own pocket.

It is these students who are most likely to be deterred from part-time HE study because of the changes in HE funding, and yet they too would clearly benefit from part-time study. Investing in skills development throughout a person's lifetime is at the heart of skills policies, and part-time HE study is integral to that. We must ensure that UK HE funding policies support that ambition rather than quash it.

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Claire Callender *is Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education and at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research focuses on student finances in higher education and related issues, including studies for the most significant UK inquiries into student funding. Claire has given evidence to various House of Commons Education Select Committees and to the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance. Claire was awarded a Fulbright New Century Scholarship, spending time at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

The Institute of Education *was rated the pre-eminent UK educational research institution in the last Research Assessment Exercise. It is the largest UK provider of postgraduate courses in the field of education with some 1,700 students studying on master's programmes, and some 800 research students, mostly studying for PhD and EdD degrees.*

Birkbeck *is a world-class research and teaching institution, ranked in the top 150 universities of the world, a vibrant centre of academic excellence, and London's only specialist provider of evening and part-time higher education. It has nearly 18,000 students including over 5,000 postgraduates and a wide range of programmes to suit every entry level.*

__David Wilkinson__ is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). He specialises in quantitative analytical research focusing on inequalities in education, and labour market disadvantage.

__NIESR__ is Britain's longest established independent economic research institute with over 60 years' experience of applying academic excellence to the needs of business and policy makers. The Institute's work falls into three distinct fields: economic modelling and macro analysis; education, training and employment; the international economy.

7

Putting students first

David Willetts

Across the world, more people aspire to higher education. It is a growth sector in mature economies and developing countries. The evidence on the benefits of higher education is overwhelming: it is good for individuals, good for the economy and good for society.

That list helps answer the question of how to pay for it. It has to be a mixed model in which the direct beneficiaries contribute but others do too. Here in the UK the Dearing report and the Browne report both recommended this sort of approach and all three main political parties have accepted it when in office. Our recent reforms tilt the system so that there will be greater contributions from graduates in reasonably-paid employment and less from the generality of taxpayers. But, according to the OECD, taxpayers will still cover 40% of the costs and, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the system is 'substantially more progressive' than the previous system – monthly repayments will be lower and 30% of graduates will pay less over their lifetimes than under the previous system. That's why, as I discovered on a recent trip to the US, our model is gaining interest in places that have university tuition fees but which lack taxpayer-subsidised and income-contingent loans to pay for them.

It is no accident that our student finance reforms are happening at a time of fiscal restraint but they are not just, or even primarily, about saving money. More public support is delivered via the student rather than via a funding agency. So we can liberate universities from the hidden regulation that comes with the power of the purse and instead have more limited but explicit regulations. According to the European University Association, English universities are already more autonomous than those in the rest of Europe, which explains their relative success. Our duty is to strengthen rather than trample upon that institutional freedom.

That is why we are liberalising student number controls. In 2012-13, universities can recruit as many students as they wish with AAB or higher in their A-Levels. The following year the threshold will be ABB – that is one-third of all full-time entrants. The end of central control for these places will enable the best possible match between students and institutions.

The overarching objective of all the changes is to deliver a better student experience. Our world-class research base has long been characterised by intense competition (sometimes so much so that is has come at the cost of collaboration), but on the teaching side we need much sharper incentives. That is why people filling in their

UCAS forms this year will have access to a new Key Information Set (KIS) covering 17 pieces of core information, often at course level. We will publish the data ourselves but also make it freely available for others to crunch and present in their own accessible ways.

We are serious about supply-side reform too. Our universities nearly all started as alternative providers offering something different from existing provision. University College London was denounced when it was set up as a 'mere lecture-bazaar'; now it is one of the world's great universities. Many of our newer institutions are already world-class. The *Times Higher* league table of the world's best 100 universities that are under 50 years old includes three UK institutions in the top 10 and 20 overall. That's six more than Australia, 11 more than the United States and more than any other country. So it makes sense to open up our system once more to a wider range of providers, while ensuring the right safeguards are in place.

There are many ways an alternative provider can enter our system. We welcome new start ups, and international institutions with experience abroad. Or an existing university might set up a commercial subsidiary aimed for example at the overseas market or at more flexible provision. I envisage a wider range of providers with a particular focus on teaching, or on the efficient delivery of licences to practise or on distance learning.

Higher education is at the early stages of globalisation. Educating citizens to a higher level is the crucial challenge for all nations wishing to modernise. And demographic change is bringing new challenges and new opportunities too: middle-income nations such as Indonesia, Turkey or Brazil are witnessing a surge in the number of young people. British higher education providers can work with them to help achieve a rapid expansion of higher education. This is an opportunity we must take. It is already a great British export industry. We have excellent universities. We have a regulatory system which gives confidence in our academic standards. And of course there is the advantage of teaching in English.

There is no cap on the number of genuine students who can come here to study but overseas students travelling to the UK to study is just one way to grow. Last year, over 425,000 overseas students came to the UK to study but even more – over 500,000 people – benefitted from British higher education whilst living abroad. This happens in many ways. They might study at an overseas campus of a British university or follow a British degree course taught in a local college.

In the US, they are at a tipping point in distance learning. On the East Coast, there is EdX, a new not-for-profit set up jointly by Harvard and MIT. On the West Coast, Coursera – which has links to Stanford – is similarly ambitious. So we may be entering a new era in distance learning as technology offers more efficient and more effective ways of learning than ever before.

British higher education must not be left behind.

*Rt Hon **David Willetts** MP is Minister for Universities and Science within the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). He is also the Conservative Member of Parliament for Havant and author of The Pinch.*

*The **Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)** supports sustained growth and higher skills across the UK economy.*

8

An economic necessity: putting postgraduates at the heart of the system

Graham Spittle

Imagine what the standing of industry and education will be in a country like India by the second half of this century. How well-skilled will the population be? Will the plan to build hundreds of new universities have paid dividends? How attractive will Western conglomerates find the relatively low cost of labour? How many of the tech jobs once found in Cambridge, Frankfurt or San Jose will now be found in the business parks of Bangalore or Gurgaon? Will Britain's role as a major hub of knowledge intensive industry have been supplanted?

In the corporate world, business leaders are always thinking about the future – where new markets might be and how their company might be positioned within them. Universities need to take a similar approach – strategically considering how the world might look decades from now – and what role their institution will play.

The economic imperative

Globalisation is already having a big impact on UK industry and UK jobs, but over the coming decades this pressure will intensify. The emerging economies will continue to mature – with their governments and employers investing massively in the infrastructure they will need to compete with us in some of our own areas of strength. For example, Brazil and China are spending huge sums educating their citizens to postgraduate level studying at foreign institutions. Other governments, notably Singapore, have developed enticing tax credit schemes, designed to tempt parts of knowledge intensive companies out of Western Europe and into South East Asia.

Given this context, it is vital that the UK takes proactive steps to maintain its global competitiveness. We start from a strong position – as historic home to a sizeable number of blue-chip high-tech corporations, and recent home to a growing number of innovative microbusinesses and SME start-ups.

As part of a new British industrial policy, where we pick races rather than winners, we must ensure that these businesses are enabled to grow and develop, and be proactive in courting other companies seeking to invest in knowledge based industries. Continued investment in the UK's education and training systems will be an important part of this economic future, but our view of skills and the HE system must be broader.

We should look to universities like Stanford, where a revolving door exists between the university and Silicon Valley. Neither would be as successful as they are today, were it not for the other. Sir Tim Wilson's recent review of UK university-business collaboration rightly recognises the entrepreneurial culture and other benefits that such partnerships can breed.

Contrary to the image conjured up by large swathes of the popular press, higher education is about much more than 18-year-olds studying for full time undergraduate degrees. Postgraduates will be of vital and growing importance to our future economic success – providing the world-leading thinking and technical skills that will be essential for tackling major business challenges. Postgraduates are "innovation catalysts", bridging the gap between ideas and business, and adding capacity to the UK's research and development workforce. Indeed, they are often the founders of many of the UK's more innovative start-ups.

The forgotten sector

In many respects postgraduates are the forgotten sector in the UK. Lord Dearing's seminal 1997 report has been criticised for failing to fully consider the position of postgraduates, whilst Lord Browne devotes only one page to postgraduate issues in his 2010 report into HE funding, concluding that no changes were necessary. Media and parliamentary debate over the last decade has focussed almost exclusively on undergraduates.

But, since the end of last year, postgraduate issues have shot up the agenda. In February of this year, the Higher Education Commission launched a major inquiry into postgraduate education. Our inquiry, which will be published this Autumn, has taken a long overdue look at the health of the postgraduate sector and will also consider what impact the reforms set out in last year's undergraduate White Paper could have.

A 'world class' postgraduate system?

In the coming years there will be a renewed focus on the quality of education that universities are providing. Government will seek to hold universities accountable for how they spend the continued public subsidy for HE, whilst an increasingly savvy and consumer-conscious generation of students will question whether they are getting value for money from their degrees. Scrutiny of exactly what education and opportunities for discovery universities are providing is likely to intensify.

In the postgraduate domain questions of quality pose something of a challenge. Precisely what does high quality postgraduate education look like? In a sector noted and acclaimed for its heterogeneity answering this question is not easy.

We often hear Vice Chancellors and government ministers talk about the UK's 'world class' HE system, but what exactly does this mean? Contributors to our review have struggled to offer up measures of quality beyond citation counts and university league tables. This is not sufficient. Right from the outset, the Coalition government has made much of its efforts to make more public data freely accessible, whilst last year's HE White Paper placed an emphasis on providing undergraduates with the data they needed to make informed choices about their future. The HE sector needs to think carefully about how they are demonstrating the value and quality of the opportunities they offer.

For postgraduate research provision, we need to be systematically benchmarking our degrees against the PhDs awarded by leading institutions in competitor nations. A greater degree of self-awareness and an understanding of student and industry perceptions will be vital in maintaining our world-leading status. For masters courses and other taught provision, institutions need to provide more clarity about the value that their courses add. We should expect institutions to be forthcoming with employment outcome data and information on the career advancement of those graduating from their vocationally orientated provision. Businesses also need to engage critically, signposting potential postgraduates to the courses that they value.

Throughout the inquiry process we have been struck by the lack of data readily available on postgraduates. The HE Commission believes there is a need for a more nuanced debate on the future of our HE sector, and exists to support evidence-based policy development. But, if we are to succeed, if HE policy is to be more informed, and if our students are to be truly empowered, there is a real need for more information and more data.

As Alan Milburn, the government's independent reviewer on social mobility, said earlier this year, 'post-graduate education is not a luxury for the individual, it is a necessity for our economy and wider society.' The UK government should recognise that their responsibility for higher education does not stop with undergraduates. We need to take a holistic whole-system view of education – and that must include postgraduates.

*Dr **Graham Spittle** CBE is Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at IBM Europe and Chair of the Higher Education Commission's inquiry into the future of postgraduate education. He is a member of the Prime Minister's Council for Science and Technology and served as the first chair of the British government's Technology Strategy Board from 2004 until 2011.*

*The **Higher Education Commission** is an independent body made up of 20 leaders from the UK education sector, the business community and the three major political parties. The Commission examines higher education policy, holds evidence-based inquiries, and produces written reports with recommendations for policymakers. The Commission's report on postgraduate education will be published in October 2012.*

9

De Montfort University's Square Mile Project: the university as a local public good

Dominic Shellard and John Craig

Across all of the UK's public services, there is a growing movement towards greater engagement with the communities they serve. To some extent, this is happening in response to challenges such as funding cuts, increased competition, and from a national reassessment of their economic and social role. To some extent, it is happening because many public services are fundamentally seeing themselves differently – as more open, and more collaborative than they have been traditionally.

In the past, engagement with local communities has not always come naturally to universities – traditionally, the 'university' and the 'community' are treated as separate entities. But in order to distinguish and renew themselves, universities need to join other public service institutions in responding to these growing expectations of community collaboration, recognising the value of the untapped resource on their doorsteps.

In 1997, the government-commissioned Dearing Report described local engagement by universities as 'patchy', and recommended a turn to 'active and systematic engagement'. Little had changed by 2010, when a report by Newcastle University found that 'university-community engagement remains peripheral in terms of universities' organisation, funding, management and strategic control, reducing their benefits for excluded communities'. It's not that *nothing* is happening, but for the most part universities are neither offering as much as they might to communities, nor *benefiting* as much as they might from them.

In this context, De Montfort University in Leicester demonstrates the potential benefits, to both sides, for university engagement with local communities. In September 2011 it launched the Square Mile project, a mix of research and interventions focused on a small area of high deprivation within walking distance of the university. The project places a premium on collaboration between the university's staff and students, local residents and the local authority, and aims not just to have an impact on a single area but to demonstrate how the skills, knowledge and expertise of *any* university can improve the wellbeing of local people.

University researchers began the project by speaking to hundreds of Square Mile residents about their experiences of living in the area. Social capital surveys conducted by community volunteers found that many residents felt disconnected and powerless to influence decisions made about their neighbourhood. They were concerned about crime, anti-social behaviour, the visible decline of their neighbourhood, the absence of good jobs, and their own employment prospects. One local simply said, 'I want to magic [myself] away from the area'. But they also articulated a clear, shared vision for what the neighbourhood could become and how the university could contribute: local people needed to communicate more about gaps in local provision and make a difference by working together; the university could help support these conversations and provide a structure for action.

University staff and students put forward over 150 ideas for projects that could respond to these needs, including introducing community projects, promoting staff and student volunteering and helping new resident groups to develop and flourish. Twenty projects were launched in September 2011.

Many of these are focused on education. University staff have taught 200 primary school children about looking after their finances, and are running a robot-designing club for secondary school students. The Centre for English Language Learning is providing free English language classes to help residents improve their command of English and their CV-writing and interview skills.

There are health projects as well: the Department of Audiology offers free hearing tests in community centres, with follow-up consultations, while student midwifes are promoting breastfeeding.

The university's students provide a particularly rich resource. Law students are providing free legal information to residents, and residents are working with departments as co-researchers, mapping the area's history and developing ideas for transforming the built environment.

So far, more than 200 university staff and students have given their time as volunteers, and participants report a notable increase in their sense of 'belonging' to the institution. Meanwhile, Square Mile is inspiring new residents' groups, who are challenging local decision-makers – a marked contrast to the sense of powerlessness that residents expressed during the initial community consultation.

The De Montfort model is a powerfully simple idea, founded on the application of familiar resources to an unfamiliar context. It's not news to anybody that universities have access to world class knowledge, skills, expertise and resources, but De Montfort's innovation is to apply these assets to the needs of its neighbours. It is reconceptualising *who* the university is for, *what* it can provide, and *how* it can provide it. And of course, the university itself stands to benefit from the knowledge, insights, and skills of the people who live near it.

This shift rests on a vision of the university as a 'public good' that goes beyond the traditional concepts of elite education and cutting-edge research – it requires a readjustment of who the 'public' is. In contrast to the 'cordial but distant' or 'gifts from on-high' attitudes of most universities, Square Mile has shown that a university can also be an innovative and creative good neighbour.

In a climate where the onus is increasingly on institutions to prove their worth, universities ignore this kind of local interaction at their peril. By forging connections to areas of life that potential applicants, staff or supporters already understand and value – as De Montfort is doing in the Square Mile – they can generate special kinds of character and value. If the success of universities in the past has been to succeed despite the world beyond their walls, the challenge now is to succeed in partnership with that world.

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Professor ***Dominic Shellard*** *became Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer at De Montfort University (DMU) in 2010. Since then, his focus has been on positioning DMU as a university of quality and distinctiveness. A professor of English Literature, he has written extensively on post-war British theatre and is co-founder of the British Library's Theatre Archive Project. He also continues to teach, sharing his enthusiasm with DMU's English literature students.*

De Montfort University (DMU) *is a university in the heart of Leicester, England distinguished by its life-changing research, dynamic international partnerships, vibrant links with business and commitment to excellence in learning, teaching and the student experience.*

John Craig *is Managing Partner of the Innovation Unit, where he leads work across public services including education, health, social care, and local government. Before joining the Innovation Unit, he was a policy advisor in the UK government at the Cabinet Office, where he led work on innovation at the Office of the Third Sector, and worked at the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit under the Labour Government. He has also worked as a senior researcher at Demos, the independent think-tank, where he focused on policy relating to communities and public services.*

The Innovation Unit *for public services is a not-for-profit social enterprise committed to using the power of innovation to solve social challenges. We have a strong track record of supporting leaders and organisations delivering public services to see and do things differently. They come to us with a problem and we empower them to achieve radically different solutions that offer better outcomes for lower costs.*

10

Education: from a public value to a positional good

John Holmwood

British higher education is entering into a period of severe disruption brought about by the government's recent policies for higher education. These are designed to increase private investment in the sector and make it more attractive to for-profit activities, including degree provision and cooperation between existing education institutions and for-profit partners.

In fact, a significant increase in private investment will come from the increased student fees that are designed to replace direct public funding via the block teaching grant from the funding agencies. These will be backed by an expanded publicly-supported student loan system. This is a system that most analysts argue will be as expensive to the public purse as the one it replaces (albeit appearing in the short-term as a saving). I contend that the primary purpose of the withdrawal of the block grant is to provide a 'level playing field' for the entry of for-profit providers and to make the student loans system available to students on their programmes.

In all of this, the government argues that it is concerned about increasing student choice, the quality of teaching and the efficiency of course delivery. These aims cannot be reconciled. It thinks the latter will come as a consequence of new entrants, increased competition and a system of differential fees for the same course. At present, there is a fee cap at the top, which is distorting the operation of this market and causing universities to cluster at the top end. At some time in the future, however, this cap will be removed and fees will move further apart. In the meantime, the 'core and margin' system is designed to increase competition at the 'top' and the 'bottom', with the intention being that if universities cannot recruit students at the market position they have sought to occupy they will reduce their fees.

The intention is that for-profit providers will be able to press fees down at the lower end, while a select few universities will be able to increase fees at the top, with a proportion of those fees supporting activities other than teaching. For-profit providers do not currently have the research or other public obligations of existing universities, and it is unlikely that they will be able to develop them. Similarly will existing institutions need to become more like for-profits in this new marketplace? This might include a significant increase in marketing budgets (25-35% of revenues at existing 'for-profit' providers like Apollo Group, Bridgepoint and Grand Canyon), an increasing reliance on casualised teaching staff and the separation of teaching staff from the design of the curriculum (itself 'outsourced' or provided in 'teaching manual' form by a separate team).

In this way, education at 'low-fee' institutions will begin to be removed from the university system, due to two main factors. First, an increasing proportion of students will be taught at institutions that do not have the accepted characteristics of universities (notwithstanding any change of university title to accommodate teaching-only institutions). Second, there will no longer be a UK-wide university system in that the emphasis will be on securing the performance of a minority of institutions within a 'global top one hundred', while the health of the system as a whole (where the British system really outperforms other national systems) will no longer be a concern of public policy. Indeed, market ideology dictates that the system will be functioning effectively providing it is fully marketised, notwithstanding the evidence from the USA that such a system, whether in health or education, produces poor outcomes for the general population at the same time as generating wasteful investment (for example, in the form of loans for 'sub-prime' education or spiralling health insurance charges).

Education is no longer about developing the individual and their critical understanding by engaging with a subject and teachers immersed within it, but instead is about investment in human capital and employability. The increased stratification of institutions of higher education is designed to be aligned with distinct employment trajectories. Just as employers have reduced their research and development budgets and sought to access and shape the research conducted by universities, so they seek to reduce their training budgets and seek to have skills training at universities shaped to their needs.

At the same time, there is little intention on the part of 'high fee' institutions to devote their additional income to improve the quality of undergraduate education. They will divert their income toward maximising their performance in international rankings. In part, this will involve diverting fee income toward research (especially as direct public funding of research is under pressure). This is possible because they are marketing education as a 'positional good' and place within the international rank order becomes a proxy for this function. Indeed, as studies have shown, the 'marketing' of education in this way is associated with grade inflation which, in the US, is driven by private, elite colleges.

When the British Social Attitudes Survey asked the public's attitudes toward higher education prior to the introduction of the recent changes, 70% agreed with the statement that 'there are more advantages to university education than simply being paid more', with only 7% disagreeing with the statement. The most recent survey shows that 76% still think that it is important for a young person to go to university or college, while 57% think fees should be the same for all universities (down from 65%). More striking, however, is that, graduates and the economically advantaged are more likely to agree with rising fees and to be in favour of a reduction in student numbers (42% and 30% respectively), while those without qualifications are less likely to favour fees (just 11% favour fees) or a reduction of student numbers (only 19% favour this).

The government frequently poses the rhetorical question, why should the person without qualifications pay for university education for others. But it is clear that this is an argument that weighs more with the beneficiaries of higher education, who perceive it as a means of protecting their labour market position. The government's argument is that it is right that those who benefit more should 'pay more'. Yet 'paying more' means that universities will also be aligned with a secondary education system in which some 'pay more' to have access to better resourced private schools. In this way, a social elite is conflated with an intellectual elite and, in the name of student choice, existing social privilege is reinforced over time.

Where universities were once perceived to be part of social amelioration, they are now an integral part of a neo-liberal knowledge economy that has been associated with widening inequalities since the 1970s. These widening inequalities include an intergenerational shift in resources away from young people; something that is further accentuated by the increase in student fees (and by a financial crisis that has led banks to drastically reduce the financing of house purchases by first-time buyers).

In the wider discussion of social inequality it is frequently argued that benefits should be targeted on those most in need. Mr Willetts continues to assert that higher education will continue to be publicly-funded through the student loans system. However, this is the only area of public policy where that funding seems to be directly targeted to secure the private benefits of the privileged. Their future earnings are to be protected, but so too is the form of education to which they have become accustomed for themselves and their children. For the rest, education is to be reduced to poorly resourced training.

John Holmwood *is Professor of Sociology in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham. He is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and President of the British Sociological Association. He is co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University (www.publicuniversity.org.uk).*

11

Making our higher education system accessible to all

John Widdowson

The debate around the future shape of higher education in England has often seemed to focus solely on the impact of those changes in student funding on full-time students moving directly from school to higher level study. Despite the fundamental shift in funding from direct state support towards a system made up almost entirely of student loans, data from the University and Colleges Application Service (UCAS) shows that applications for full-time courses from this group of students appears to have suffered least from fears of debt aversion. Thus, for the majority of young people, entry into higher education still remains a realistic and desirable option on leaving school, a view perhaps strengthened by the current lack of appropriate employment opportunities.

The picture for mature students seems to be less encouraging as students assess the relative benefits and life-changing potential of higher level education against the impact of long-term debt and the uncertainty of post-graduation employment. In this instance, current UCAS data suggests a fall of over 30% in the numbers of mature applicants against 2011 figures. The changes in funding for part-time students planned for 2013 introduce another element of uncertainty.

As the prospect for legislation to set the parameters for the new system in England diminishes, the promised revolution in higher education may not be as radical as first appeared.

Mature students form an essential element in our higher education student body. They bring a wealth of life experiences and refreshingly different perspectives which add to the educational experience of all students. Part-time students (many of whom would also of course see themselves as mature learners) bring their experience of the real world of work, complementing and often contrasting with the more academic aspects of study. They bring with them a different impetus – the realisation that people need jobs, skills and qualifications in order to obtain security, status and lifestyle.

The potential reduction of both of these types of student can only diminish our higher education institutions and the experiences they offer to all students. If institutions wish to maintain this diverse student body and play their full part in securing fairer and better access for this 'at risk' group, there are a number of measures which could be taken.

To begin with, curriculum delivery models and course structures could be made truly flexible. Arriving at precise, all-purpose definitions of 'full-' and 'part-time' study has proved elusive. Rather than pursue this seemingly impossible task, the opportunity should be taken to make the curriculum open to all, irrespective of their mode of study. Universities and colleges have the opportunity to make the artificial boundary between full and part-time study much more permeable, encouraging students to study together and share their varied experiences and backgrounds. A robust credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS) which allows students to move freely between institutions according to the changing demands of their working and personal lives must become a key feature of this new system. Modular course design with bankable credits will encourage more students to study at a time which suits them. This will allow them to plan their studies to deal not only with its cost implications but also the other more intractable issues of balancing work, family and social life with study. A responsive CAT system also sustains the concept of self-development through hard work and application across successive generations.

'Lifelong learning' has been a much overused concept, though one with much untapped potential. The new flexibilities now made available within the English higher education system can make this more of a reality. Why should the 'normal' experience of higher education be measured against a traditional model of three years full-time study after leaving school at eighteen? The new landscape gives institutions the ability to open up the curriculum, encouraging students to learn when and how it suits them, not solely through historical patterns determined by institutions. The same arguments may be applied to the 'gold standard' of the three year Honours degree. More flexible models will not only encourage more students to participate but may also encourage more two-year intensive courses as well as accommodating those who wish to study over a longer period of, say, up to five years. Students planning to use their higher education qualification to further their careers may also balance the work-related nature of a two year foundation degree against the more academic content of the traditional Honours degree.

The same issues arise when considering degree-level equivalent qualifications. Given that students themselves will pay the full price for their higher education, a philosophy of lifelong learning must surely support individuals in their choice of what is best for them and their career development. In a rapidly changing economy, progression must not just be seen as vertical (i.e. to a higher post-graduate level) but also lateral as individuals make choices (and investments) in the skills which will sustain them in employment at the same or equivalent level. This in turn will help to foster a culture of lifelong higher learning: higher level study will be seen less as a once in a lifetime experience and more as a personal resource which needs to be constantly renewed.

Breaking down the barriers between the workplace and higher education presents a further challenge. Many very able young people make the choice at sixteen to follow a vocational pathway via an apprenticeship. Progression to higher education from apprenticeships has been low despite the demand for higher level applied skills from employers. A more open curriculum offer at higher level would encourage apprentices to build on their qualifications and progress to higher levels. Coupled with a credible approach to accrediting skills and knowledge acquired in the workplace, this could play a crucial role in broadening access to a neglected group of learners. Of course, some traditional views of the purpose of higher level study must be challenged if this is to become a reality. Those designing higher qualifications must learn to speak the same language as the employers they work with and reflect more directly the real life demands of the work place. Employer involvement in curriculum design and delivery, which in some institutions is often little more than rhetoric, would need to become more of a day-to-day reality.

Finally, institutions themselves must learn to work better together as part of an integrated regional, national and even international higher education system. Credit accumulation and transfer will only work if the higher education system makes a real commitment to collaborative working in areas which have hitherto been carefully guarded. Social mobility is linked to geographical mobility as students move between employers and locations to pursue their careers. Artificial barriers between institutions, perhaps based on an absolutist view of institutional autonomy, can impede this and must be challenged and removed so that students can move as seamlessly as possible between a variety of providers at the time, place and method which suits them best.

The revolution in higher education may be taking longer to appear than at first thought. However, much can be done within the new English system to ensure that the emerging landscape is as inclusive as possible.

__John Widdowson__ CBE is Principal and Chief Executive of New College Durham and is Chair of the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges.

__New College Durham__ is a Mixed Economy College combining both further and higher education in the same institution. The College is one of only two in England with the power to award Foundation degrees.

12

University narrative: lessons from the financial crisis?

Ken Starkey

Sir Alan Langlands, head of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), has recently argued that universities need to develop a new narrative of how higher education creates value. Here I address the question of university narrative and ask if there are any lessons we can learn about narrative and about value from the recent banking crisis?

Prior to the crisis we saw banking leaders championing a narrative that banks were critical to national economies because they provided the engine of growth. Banking might be making bankers even richer but, not to worry, it was creating a more effective and safer banking sector, facilitating growth in other sectors, and managing risk better through 24/7 trading. Banking leaders even argued that they were doing 'God's work'. The theory was that this would not create risk for the economy as a whole because markets, being self-regulating, have built-in controls against over-leveraging. As one Nobel-Prize winning economist, Merton Miller, stated, it was not worth worrying about second-order, self-correcting problems like financial leveraging, because theory demonstrated that this could not happen.

Some banking leaders, unfortunately still not a majority, and many of their critics are now arguing that we need a new narrative for financial services. It seems reasonably clear what this might comprise. First of all comes culture change – a return to traditional banking values re-focussed upon service and customer relationships – and a call to liberate banks from the dominance of an investment banking mind-set where the priority is generating profit through short-term trading rather than investing in the long-term future of clients and the economy. Banks are perceived to have failed to deliver on their side of the social contract which now needs reconstituting through prioritising long-term relationships rather than sales-driven transactions. There needs to be a new focus on equity to counter the infatuation with leverage.

There are possible parallels here with higher education. David Willetts, the universities minister in the current UK government, argues regularly that universities need to give better value to students/consumers, with better quality engagement with their clients. The debate around the student experience suggests that at some universities students have become a means rather than an end and that student fees, particularly international student fees, are treated as capital to be leveraged, with a lack of transparency about how they are contributing to an improved student experience. This perception is likely to become more intense as home and EU student fees rise and students become more vocal in criticising a perceived weakening of their social contract with the university. As with the banking sector, I predict a growing demand for culture change.

One major challenge for university leaders will be to work out how to deliver better service in a culture where research is prioritised before teaching by many of its staff and funders. There is a genuine confusion about the role of the university. Its funders, government and students, have expectations that do not sit easily with current 'business practices'. The danger is that an overly simplistic narrative of its role runs the risk of alienating its consumers. Economic growth, particularly at a time of deteriorating business conditions, will prove a difficult yardstick for universities to meet. Employability, a growing concern for students, will also be very difficult to deliver in our current austerity conditions. A common theme uniting protestors from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street and the Occupy the City movements is an increasingly educated and vocal youth with dwindling life chances expressing their sense of betrayal. The banks encouraged people to buy products – sub-prime mortgages being the worst example – that promised much but actually delivered unsustainable debts. Let us hope universities do not come to be seen in a similar light.

Effective narratives achieve two things. They are credible and they help people make sense of the world. In troubling times universities still have much to offer in terms of helping students make sense of the world. This part of their historical mission must not be allowed to fade away under the pressure of pure economic justification. Economy needs balancing with society and culture, giving universities a key role to play beyond 'employability' in helping students create a viable and sustainable sense of identity. A key challenge for banks and other forms of business beyond banking – both the pharmaceutical industry and the news media also stand accused of abusing their power – is to demonstrate how they create value for their customers and why customers should trust them. Universities also have to face this challenge. It is not clear yet what new narrative will be believable or trustworthy.

In my own area of the university, the business school, there has been much debate about the financial crisis, not least because it was the theories of finance and globalisation created and championed by the business schools and economics departments of leading US universities that created the narrative that helped lead to the crisis. It was the graduates, the MBAs from top business schools, who became the shock troops of the investment banks and other firms purveying the ideas of a new financialised economy. More enlightened business schools are working with business to challenge the crisis of trust that they, and many businesses, now face[1].

The banking crisis is widely perceived to reflect a failure of business and academic leadership. Business leaders such as Paul Polman of Unilever argue that we need a new model of business and a new sort of values-led business leadership that reflects and is responsive to the complex interdependence of healthy business and healthy society. The challenge for business schools is to work with the business leaders of the future to create the knowledge and the management practices that best align individual, business and societal interests, thus regaining the trust of stakeholders, and to educate students who embody and enact more sustainable business practice. The challenge for university leaders is to work with their stakeholders to develop a narrative of higher education that provides a new sense of direction adequate for our challenging times.

Reference

1 Starkey, K. and Hall, C. (2012) The spirit of leadership: New directions in leadership education, in S. Snook, N. Nohria and R. Khurana (eds.) *The Handbook of Teaching Leadership. Knowing, Doing, and Being*, Los Angeles: Sage.

Ken Starkey *is Professor of Management and Organisational Learning at Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham. His research interests include leadership and the future of higher education with particular emphasis upon the role of the business school.*

Nottingham University Business School *is one of the UK's leading business schools for teaching and research with a particular emphasis upon sustainability, entrepreneurship and innovation. The University of Nottingham is a world-class university ranked in the UK top 10, the European top 30 and in the top 1% of all universities worldwide. It is the most international of UK universities with campuses in the UK, China and Malaysia.*

13

The idea of a tertiary education system

Liam Burns

In his recent book, *What Are Universities For?* Professor Stefan Collini writes, with obvious sarcasm, 'it's hardly surprising that no deathless prose has yet been written about the idea of a tertiary education system'. But perhaps that's something we should change. We could find great radicalism in a new vision for tertiary education.

What might we mean by this?

Tertiary education literally means 'third education' – that which comes after primary and secondary education. But in a world where fourteen year olds go to college and education and training is compulsory up to the age of eighteen, this is much too simple a definition. The term isn't helped by its relative obscurity, and it can sound remote and technocratic. So instead of taking the word literally, we should take what it represents and give it new meaning, to make sense in today's world.

It represents, for example, a challenge to educational categories and path dependencies that we have become locked into, holding us back, and creating artificial divisions. Liberal versus vocational, further education versus higher education, colleges versus universities, research versus teaching, traditional versus modern, full-time versus part-time – the list could go on and on. These old and tired debates fill up too much of our thinking time. They are boring, and they do little work for us anymore. The idea of the tertiary allows us to shatter these false oppositions and the false boundaries between them.

We can use the idea to challenge educational structures and policies that hold people back and put barriers in their way. There should not, for example, be a presumption that vocational training and work in the real world is inadequate preparation for academic courses. We have heard from talented apprentices whom 'leading' UK universities will not touch because they don't have A-levels – this sort of thing is pure snobbery, and it is counterproductive. Our system here in the UK is tremendously unforgiving of mistakes, especially mistakes made by young people. Choosing a diverse mix of subjects, or simply attempting something ambitious and not quite make it: these are not to be encouraged in the new political economy of higher education. For many, missing out on those vital AAB A-level grades is now unbearably perilous – a recipe for playing-it-safe attitudes, low on imagination or lateral thinking.

There should be no presumption that 360 credits of undergraduate study in a lifetime ought to be enough for anyone, unless of course they are training to be a doctor, dentist or engineer. We now have a system where the price of doing more than the normal amount of undergraduate study at any time in one's life is to be a privilege for only the super-wealthy, making the last UK government's rightly derided equivalent or lower-level qualification (ELQ) policy look like peanuts, and spelling death to lifelong learning. A simple yet enormously ambitious reform: to actually make it an expectation that half of all graduates will become undergraduates again, part-time, at some point in their lives.

We should stop seeing progression itself as linear, only ever moving up the scale of educational levels. Why not further education after higher, or why not both together? In the space of three years, is it beyond our wit to enable people to study a history degree and a BTEC management diploma, at the same time? We should assume that it isn't beyond the wit of our international competitors, and start to think about how colleges and universities can really work together on their core curriculum, not just marginal 'HE in FE/ FE in HE' provision.

We should also stop wasting our vast educational estate. Why do we close our primary schools at 4pm? There are tens of thousands of publicly-owned and locally-controlled learning centres embedded in every community up and down the land. They should be sites for adult education organised by universities and colleges. There could be a national volunteer force of graduates to support it, building social connections and developing their skills. While we're at it, open up the libraries, by funding institutions specifically to make their learning resources available to the community.

The idea of the tertiary says something important about a universal ambition for education. Not merely post-compulsory, but all-encompassing. It has been estimated (by Tom Schuller and David Watson) that of all our education spending, only 15% is spent on people over the age of 24; as this century progresses and as we all live longer, this begins to look very wrong. We should try to imagine a future in which four in every five people have a direct stake in a tertiary education system – participating in it, using it throughout their lives, with the funding and time to benefit from it to the full. That would be a system we could truly call universal, like our health system is universal. This is about education meeting people's needs from the nursery to old age.

It is a democratic idea. In fact, it is an imperative for democracy at a time when democracy is getting harder and harder to pull off. A good education is the making of good citizens. We want them to be able to negotiate their differences and their competing interests, with civility, restraint and mutual respect. We want people to be able to challenge what they read in the papers and see on TV. We want them to know how the laws are made that govern their lives, and how they might change them. We want them to know the beauty of science and the natural world, the relevance of history and literature, and the power and pleasure of practical skills.

Why is it so hard for our politicians to speak of these things instead of talking all the time in the cold, dead language of the market? It is because they haven't got an educational philosophy worth believing in.

But the idea of the tertiary is worth believing in. It invites us to develop policies and practices that allow people's hopes to become possible. People want to have power over their own lives, to comprehend the world, to be liberated, to be capable in work and life. We want an education system that can do these things.

Tertiary education: not a campaign, or a manifesto, or an objective, or a policy, or indeed a spring for 'deathless prose', but an idea – and an idea whose time has come.

__Liam Burns__ was elected as NUS UK President for 2011–12, after being elected as Deputy President and President of NUS Scotland. As President of NUS, Liam is responsible for leading on the organisations Priority campaign, calling for reinvestment of public funding in tertiary education and an end to the current tuition fees regime. He grew up in Fife where he attended Glenrothes College. He graduated in Physics at Heriot-Watt University, where he was both the Students' Association Vice-President (Education& Welfare) and subsequently President. Liam has been an Officer within the European Students' Union and has been involved in Quality Assurance processes both on a national and European level through The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The __National Union of Students (NUS)__ is a confederation of over 200 students' unions across the UK and represents over seven million students. It works to promote, defend and extend students rights as well as promoting strong and active students' unions.

14

Bursting bubbles in higher education

Mark Leach

In higher education, policy bubbles are commonplace. They float around the sector drawing disproportionate levels of interest and as they grow, they become less rooted in evidence, research or coherent thought. It is important to understand these bubbles if we are to improve policy-making in higher education, a project that has never been more important.

Shortly after tulips found their way across Europe in the 17th century, their exotic and beautiful qualities quickly made them a sought-after luxury item. In the Netherlands, they came to represent the newfound confidence of the Dutch who had cast off their imperial masters to find extraordinary wealth through trade around the world. The intensity of their colours and patterns caused by a virus in the bulbs made them unique amongst flowers available at the time. People started to pay extravagant sums for the bulbs so that they could get their hands on the ultimate symbol of status and wealth. Taking seven years to grow from a single seed, speculators saw an opportunity to make money and a tulip futures market was born. Prices started to rise as more and more speculators entered the market and the bulbs started being sold for outlandish prices, with many examples of people putting their entire life savings, property and fortunes up against them.

The peak of 'tulip mania' came during the winter of 1636–37, when it was commonplace for a tulip bulb to change hands ten times in one day, such was the vigour of the market. But like every bubble, the tulip market was to dramatically crash, after some non-payments led to panic and a collapse in demand.

Lessons from history have not been learnt and bubbles continue to appear across the gamut of human experience; most famously and damagingly, in the global economy. In his book, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841), Charles Mackay puts this down to the way in which crowds of people can behave irrationally, yet individually may continue act in clear and rational ways. Examples through history have shown this unfortunate human quality to linger, and policy-making has certainly not been immune.

The way policy is made in higher education, particularly at the level between universities and government, is both distinctive and misunderstood. It is also extremely important, yet the higher education sector will often underestimate its own power to make change; either by design to avoid political difficulty, or by ignorance born of a short-termism and the need to be 'seen to be doing something'.

The UK government devolves much of the detailed policymaking to the funding councils who then work with different sector agencies to create something akin to a consensus about the way forward. This approach is used across a range of important policy issues – from teaching funding mechanisms, to the process and principles of quality assurance.

But terms are always kept deliberately narrow, and whilst the crowd around the table often represent big thinkers with rich experience, deeply held paradigms about power in the sector are often used to excuse not doing something. Policy bubbles are prone to originate in this zone, particularly when there is money to dole out on the trendy issues of the day such as 'public information' or the 'student experience'.

But what is a policy bubble precisely? Its porous borders make it hard to define, but there are many examples of policy in higher education from the last few years that have taken on the characteristics of a bubble. Take student engagement, a classic victim of this syndrome in the UK.

It suffered from being too popular, too quickly and before it was firmly grounded by a coherent intellectual underpinning, a bubble was born. Politicians started to use student engagement as a buzz-word for sounding progressive and up to date about higher education. Commercial events companies began organising conferences based around the 'issue', without fully understanding it. Research was commissioned and presented, centres of excellence rose and fell; ink was spilled all over the education press. Yet as an idea, it had not yet been fully realised and defined, even by its biggest proponents and certainly not by its critics. When something starts to mean all things to all people, this is often the sign of a bubble about to drift away in to the policy stratosphere.

That is not to say that there is no good work in student engagement; of course there is. There are also many very well intentioned people working within this area right now, making positive progress with newfound support from senior university staff and policymakers. But by its definition, a bubble is not a sustainable construct and both their journey up and their dramatic end can be detrimental to policymaking itself. Those same people doing good work will want to ensure that it has a lifetime beyond a limited project fund or public 'hot topic'.

But few bubbles leave much of a legacy to speak of; their volatile trajectory sees them suck in disproportionate attention, funding, interest and political capital on the way up. And when they finally burst, a lot of people are left to mop up the remains asking 'where did this *really* take us?'

Bubbles also represent a particularly reductionist approach to policymaking, boiling down and dividing up the academy in ways that suit civil servants, not universities and students.

In times where resources are scarce, there is less scope to throw irrational sums of money into policy bubbles, but they continue to grow. Their journey depends more on human flaws and in an increasingly pressurised environment, people are more prone to do irrational things. Particularly when they act collectively, as history shows us. With so many big questions about the future of higher education on the table and a waning appetite for public investment, the pressure to answer them has never been higher. The need for more sustainable policymaking has taken on a new urgency.

This is why the higher education sector need to move beyond bubbles and shake other bad policy habits that do us no good at all. We must also stop underestimating just how much is in our power to make changes for the better.

We need to meet the policy challenges set by government, students, academics, a struggling economy and a more interested public, no matter which way the political winds are blowing. But it has to happen in a sustainable way and it needs to include input from all quarters. We also need leaders that are unafraid of challenging the old paradigms, prepared to take risks and perhaps try a different way of doing the business of policy. When these things come together well, magic can happen. And for those that work in policy and care about the future of our sector, that's a far more beautiful sight than even the prettiest tulips.

Mark Leach is founder and Editor of wonkhe.com.

Wonkhe is a blog for higher education wonks, those who work in the HE sector and anyone interested in higher education policy, culture and politics.

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The philanthropic turn

Robert Lethbridge

The furious debate engendered by the introduction of the £9,000 tuition fee for students starting their university courses in England this October has had both immediate and far-reaching consequences. Whether or not prompted by the headlines predicting an overall decline in applications, overlaid by a genuine fear that prospective debt would discourage wider access, a number of older universities have been offered increased funding for bursaries and other purposes by many alumni who had themselves received a free education in an earlier age. The Ross-Case survey of 150 UK universities found that the number of donors had risen by 10% between 2009–10 and 2010–11. Such personal generosity has been particularly evident in Oxford and Cambridge, where institutional loyalty is intensified by a collective wish to secure for their successors the formative collegiate experience each generation has enjoyed. Indeed, and not just for that reason, those two universities raised some 44% of the sector's new funds in 2010–11.

Less publicized, however, is the new reliance on philanthropy as an income stream more generally. In the context of continuing public spending cuts, starting with the 80% reduction in the T(eaching) grant and, more stealthily, the compensatory tuition fee being frozen (possibly until the next election), universities are embarking on fundraising campaigns designed not simply to support disadvantaged students, but rather to sustain and develop core activities. Oxford and Cambridge, taking advantage of a collegiate focus, as well as foregrounding institutional projects, have each raised over £1 billion in recent years. But it is precisely the widening of the rationale, beyond the needs of young people going into HE, which is forcing us to think through the challenges of moving towards a UK funding strategy very gradually creeping towards the US model. Alleviating hardship and facilitating access have an emotional imperative which does not easily translate to endowing academic posts, refurbishing laboratories or paying post-docs. Philanthropy is at a turning point.

The most significant part of HE activity marginalised by the debate about tuition fees is the funding of postgraduates. Leaving aside the number of them who are put off from applying or those that will complete their first degrees with substantial debts, here too spending cuts have resulted in a decrease of studentships to support further study. There remains the misperception that postgraduates are of secondary importance, 'eternal students' unwilling to move on into the 'real' world of employment. In fact, the throughput from undergraduate studies to advanced research is absolutely vital to the knowledge economy on which the UK depends. And our current funding of postgraduates is simply not competitive, forcing many of those at the cutting-edge to leave our own world-beating universities and take their talents and ideas overseas, particularly to the US where 100% financial packages for Masters and PhD candidates are commonly available.

It is not by chance that it is from the other side of the Atlantic that we have the most inspiring example of what can be done. Just over 10 years ago, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation made what remains the largest donation ever made to a UK university, endowing the Gates Cambridge Scholarships to the tune of $210m. Every year some 90 incoming postgraduates receive fully-funded awards, irrespective of means or background. There are now almost 900 Gates alumni, from some 95 countries and counting. What was exemplary about this philanthropic initiative was the freedom given to the University itself. The establishment of a separate ring-fenced Trust, entrusts Cambridge to invest in brainpower – unconstrained by prescription. One might have imagined, given the longstanding priorities of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a preference for research in microbiology or global health. However, the investment is more visionary than that; grounded in an understanding of the mutually enriching intellectual perspectives afforded by a university such as Cambridge. It offers outstanding young people the opportunity to take *any* postgraduate course or doctoral programme for which they are qualified. They are selected by Departments and Faculties in the first instance, ranked by academic merit and judged on the 'fit' between what the University excels at and what work the candidates wish to pursue. Only subsequently are they measured against what we might term the 'Gates criteria' of potential leadership capacity and improving the lives of others (both interpreted in their widest sense). Gates Scholars are thus to be found in every discipline, in addition to the technological, scientific and medical research areas. For even the ramifications of these disciplines are inseparable from the social, financial, political and cultural frameworks in which the results and outcomes of research might be implemented.

The UK's leading universities urgently needs other philanthropists to follow the Gates example and recognize how far we have suddenly moved from the state-sponsored continental ethos of the 'public good'. A sign of the times is the recent £26m donation to Oxford from the widow of Ahmet Ertegun (of music industry fame). As in the case of the Gates Trust, the University retains the freedom to dispense, qualified only by the fact that the scholarships will be reserved for students of the humanities – which is both understandable and admirable, a small countering of the subordination of the latter to the heavy costs of advanced science. The annual *Sunday Times* 'Rich List' suggests that educational philanthropy is attractive to current donors and simultaneously quantifies a huge, growing and largely untapped resource. If it is the turn of philanthropy, taking over from the diminished public purse, to allow our universities to flourish, then it will need to be informed by a mind-set perhaps different from the creation of the wealth from which it will be drawn. We cannot afford a corrosive tension between control (disguised as interest) and selflessness.

Research in a university context, carried out with passion, brilliance and modest financial reward, often functions at its best when not precisely synchronized with commercial or government agendas. It is worth remembering the link between the oft-traduced notion of academic freedom and the fact that the UK's top universities have been, in international league-tables up to now, astonishingly highly-rated. Ultimately, it will be confidence in that exceptional quality on which philanthropy will depend if it is to sustain it.

__Robert Lethbridge__ is Provost of Gates Cambridge, Master of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge and Hon. Professor of Nineteenth-Century French Literature at the University of Cambridge. He is Emeritus Professor of French Language & Literature in the University of London. Much of his research has been devoted to French Naturalism. He has also taught and published extensively in interdisciplinary perspectives.

The __Gates Cambridge Trust__ was established in October 2000 and has exempt charity status in the UK. It is regulated by the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) via the University of Cambridge. Gates Cambridge Scholarships are highly competitive full-cost scholarships. They are awarded to outstanding applicants from countries outside the UK to pursue a full-time postgraduate degree in any subject available at the University of Cambridge. The programme aims to build a global network of future leaders committed to improving the lives of others.

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Two-year accelerated degrees: blue sky or in the red?

Roxanne Stockwell

Over the past decade the UK government has repeatedly tried to encourage universities to offer two year honours degrees for undergraduates (Smith, 2006; Curtis, 2009; Haldenby, 2009; BBC, 2011). The reason given has been to save costs, and as cost-saving now seems to be the top agenda item in UK higher education policy, the prospect of saving a third in undergraduate delivery deserves to be looked at seriously. Indeed, if it really is possible to provide undergraduate degrees in two years instead of three years[1] and at two-thirds of the cost, then that could virtually eliminate the 30% taxpayer subsidy currently predicted by the government through the student loan system (Hansard, 2012). Removing the need for this subsidy should reduce the need for government regulation, meaning greater freedom for universities and even the removal of student number controls[2]. Yet there has been a surprising lack of clarity in the debate about something that could be so financially momentous.

The government's reasoning appears to be that given the long summer breaks of traditional universities, three years of learning could easily be squeezed into two years and at little extra cost to the university, so students would only have to pay two years of tuition. Detractors argue that two years of learning is less than three, and that quality must be the inevitable compromise (Swain, 2010). Such degrees could only be the equivalent of foundation degrees rather than honours degrees, and the graduates would not be as well regarded (Pallis, 2006).

To what extent are either of these positions correct?

The first question is to see if it is possible to deliver a full honours degree in two years. Under The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)[3] guidelines, an honours degree would normally comprise 360 credits of learning (QAA, 2008). Each credit represents 10 notional learning hours (NLH), so a student should undertake approximately 1,200 learning hours a year over three years. So it is not possible for a

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1 Note that this discussion is about reducing typical three year degrees to two years, and therefore it is not about longer degrees such as the engineering or medical degrees.

2 Student number controls are the mechanism by which the UK government caps the number of university places in the UK, creating unmet demand and reducing competitiveness.

3 This is the body that regulates higher education quality and standards in the UK.

university to simply cut out a year and call their two-year degree an honours degree – 360 credits must be fitted in somehow.

University years vary, but in most the student learning occurs over a 30-32 week period divided into three unequal terms. This leaves about 20 weeks of holidays typically comprising a major break of 14 weeks in the summer, and several weeks at Easter and Christmas, generally with half term breaks as well. Thirty weeks of learning is enough to fit in 1,200 NLH at about 40 hours a week, and as a three-year degree is meant to be full-time this level of learning activity seems about right. But it does mean that the government is correct in that there does seem to be a lot of space in the typical undergraduate year to potentially add further learning. It would be perfectly possible (from a student perspective) to add an additional 15 week term, thereby completing another 60 credits, and still allow annual holidays of seven weeks. This is achieved without having to increase the intensity of weekly study, but simply by reducing holidays.

By reorganising the year in this manner, universities could allow students to complete exactly the same amount of learning on either a two-year (180 credits a year) or a three-year (120 credits a year) programme. This could be viewed as a simple timetable reorganisation.

Some universities have expressed doubts about the educational value of two-year degrees, voicing concerns that students would be unable to cope and that their academic standards would be lower. I see no reason for this in the plan outlined above. Students would study at the same weekly intensity, but would have 7 weeks holiday instead of 20+. Perhaps there is a suggestion that the long summer break helps with academic performance. If students were known for spending that time thinking about their studies during the past year and debating issues with classmates that may be true, but to me that seems very unlikely. In any case, to ensure equal standards universities could have all students undertake the same modules and assessments, and indeed two-year and three-year students could study in the same classes for two-thirds of the year. If there were any substantial difference in performance, then this could be identified and analysed.

However, reorganising the year is not a straightforward task for the traditional university, given its annual rhythms developed over years (and in some case centuries) of academic activity. Rather than create a new 15 week term over the summer, an alternative approach could be to increase the intensity of weekly study i.e. give students the opportunity to complete 180 credits within the current university terms. In essence this would mean doing an extra module each term, and studying at the rate of 60 NLH a week, instead of the current 40 NLH a week. Some may vigorously disagree with this level of intensity and certainly it will be tougher than existing three-year programmes.

There are, however, three arguments in its favour. Firstly, we already expect this level of intensity from masters students who complete 180 credits in a year within the normal university terms. No one seems to think that is too intense. True, they are more experienced students, but this is offset by the greater level of difficulty of a masters. Secondly, we also de facto expect this level of intensity from part-time students. A typical part-time course is simply the full-time course cut in half and done over 6 years. A student in employment of 40 hours a week, is expected to study for 20 NLH a week (given the annual terms are the same as for full-time students) – and that makes a type of 60 hour week. If we expect this from both part-time and masters students, then why not from undergraduates? We should at least consider giving them the option. Thirdly, NLH are only approximate, and according to many studies students do not work a 40 hour study week. In fact the average student on a full-time three year programme studies about 25 hours a week (Bekhradnia, 2012; NUS, 2008)[4], and as little as 21 hours a week for some subjects, and that really does make it seem possible to increase the study time by 50% by doing an extra module, therefore having to study 30-33 hours a week. Again, content and assessments could remain unchanged, with two-year students studying alongside three-year students. This helps ensure that the standards of the degree programme are not reduced in any way.

In short, the 30 week academic year and the fact that the average student might only study for 20 hours a week throws doubt on whether current three-year undergraduate honours degrees can really be regarded as full-time. It seems that the government might be right and that there is scope to fit the same amount of learning into two years, whether by adding a 15 week term, by increasing the level of intensity of study, or some mix of the two. Furthermore, this can be done without necessarily diluting content or standards.

So it does seem possible to do this, but does it mean cost savings?

The UK government's view is most definitely yes. Whatever the mechanism, the argument is that universities could teach 180 credits in a year at the same cost (or only a very little more) as 120 credits. This is most clearly seen in the fact that students on two-year degrees are only able to draw down two years of tuition fees from the Student Loan Company (SLC), and that means that they will pay a maximum of £18,000 for a 360 credit degree, as opposed to £27,000 for the same programme studied over three years. This must assume, at least implicitly, that either no extra resources are needed for the delivery of 180 credits, or that universities are inefficient and that there are significant unused resources (such as buildings and staff) that are currently being paid for anyway and could be used on teaching extra credits.

[4] See also NIESR (http://goo.gl/GHO3c); The Washington Post (http://goo.gl/eDKSa) and the definition of a full-time student on the DirectGov website (http://goo.gl/HYmB1) at 21 hours a week over 24 weeks in the year.

What resources are needed for the delivery of an undergraduate programme? The main marginal costs (i.e. costs triggered directly by the learning and teaching needs of student enrolments) are teaching hours, room hours and facilities, marking, and academic and pastoral support – and all of these costs accrue *whenever* the modules are delivered. The total marginal cost for the delivery of 360 credits is broadly the same, whether delivered over three years or two years.

Then there are central costs i.e. those costs not directly triggered by the teaching and learning needs of student enrolments. These include such things as quality assurance, design of courses and materials, marketing and training of teachers etc. It is true that these costs are not increased by running a course over three years instead of two – but equally they are not reduced by running a course over two years instead of three. These costs by in large need to be 'repaid' over the life of the course, irrespective of whether the programme runs for two or three years. For example, the marketing cost (sometimes called the acquisition cost per student) will generally be paid prior to enrolment, but is related to the total income brought in by the student, whether received over two or three years. Similarly, the investment made in the design and development of a new programme will be based on projections of revenue (irrespective of the length of the programme), and if that projection is only two-thirds of the potential fee then the investment must be reduced accordingly.

In short, the cost of developing and delivering a degree, whether to run over two or three years, is largely the same in total. This is assuming that the student experiences the same programme and is taught the same number of modules with the same teaching, learning and assessment design at the same level of quality. The timing is different, but the total cost is not.

The government's assumption that a three year programme would be substantially cheaper if delivered over two years is therefore incorrect. If a university decided to offer a two-year programme and deliver 180 credits a year, then that will cost the university more per year than the equivalent 120 credits a year delivered as part of a three-year programme.

What about the alternative assumption of significant inefficiencies in the current system?

One of the main costs is teaching hours, and the idea appears to be that outside teaching weeks university lecturers are unoccupied and can therefore easily squeeze in a 50% increase in teaching and learning activity. The reality is that lecturers *are* occupied outside teaching weeks, and the assumption that they are not shows an almost wilful misunderstanding of the typical academic's job description. In addition to marking, student support (for long term research students), course design and updating, personal Continuing Professional Development (CPD), administration and reporting, there is most importantly the other major activity of the typical university lecturer: thinking and research. Lecturers certainly consider that they work a full-time work load, and have a system of annualised teaching hours (allowing them to balance teaching and research) as negotiated with the relevant union and their university to support this. Therefore, the addition of extra classes over the summer (or at any time of the year) is an increase of work load, and therefore requires more staffing resource.

A similar but more convincing argument can be made in relation to classroom space in that many university buildings are standing empty over the summer and could therefore be used for additional classes at little additional cost. This argument has merit, as given the typical structure of the academic year there are undoubtedly inefficiencies of building use. However, many universities now hire out their facilities outside term-time to create an income stream, and this would need to be offset against any potential savings. Secondly, this argument only applies to existing traditional universities and not to new providers. New providers are considerably less likely to set up their year so that expensive building space is unoccupied for significant periods. They will either hire when they need space, and not outside that time, or construct a model which uses the whole year in some way.

In short, the only significant inefficiency saving that would be made by switching to a two-year programme would be through classroom use, and that inefficiency is most likely to be the highest in more traditional providers and those who have not yet explored facilities hire income streams.

Even though the cost savings do not appear to be as financially momentous as suggested in my opening paragraph, I believe there are two economic arguments that mean two-year degrees should be encouraged. Firstly, students would need only two years of maintenance loans instead of three and as this amounts to a saving on the total cost of over 10%[5] this is not insignificant. Secondly, it means students are moved into the work force into graduate jobs a year earlier. This is beneficial to the student, to employers (provided that graduates have the relevant skills), and to the Inland Revenue that would collect student loan repayments sooner. The payment of taxes through enhanced income is often used as a public good argument to support the subsidy of a university education. It follows that the sooner students become employed graduates the better.

Given this, there are good reasons why the government should encourage universities to consider offering two-year degrees. But are they doing so? Despite the enthusiastic rhetoric seen over the past decade, the current funding arrangements actively discourage two-year degree offerings. Universities are only able to charge per year, not per credit. If they deliver 180 credits instead of 120 they cannot increase their tuition fee to cover the cost. It is therefore decidedly against their economic interests to offer two-year honours degrees. Put another way they can receive 50% more tuition per student by continuing with the current three-year programmes.

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[5] The savings on living expenses is something University of Buckingham (http://goo.gl/GF2Sl) makes much of in its marketing materials, calculating the overall costs of completing a degree with them.

My conclusion is simple. The funding policy should be changed so that universities can charge tuition in proportion to the credits offered in any one year. Universities could then look more closely at the ways that shorter degrees could be offered without any compromise on either academic standards or revenue. Students would have greater choice. Savings would be made. The current estimate of government subsidy of university costs is 30%. One year of maintenance savings would reduce this by a third, and when coupled with an extra year of graduate tax-paying employment this could de facto cut the projected subsidy in half. This will not eliminate the subsidy altogether as suggested in my opening paragraph, nor will it lead to the regulatory freedoms that would be the consequence of that, but it could be a relatively simple way of creating a more financially sustainable long term future for higher education, and one that offers students more choice.

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Roxanne Stockwell *is Managing Director of Pearson's Higher Education Awards division, and Principal of Pearson College. She originally studied Arts/Law at the University of Sydney, and then worked as a lawyer specialising in Intellectual Property and Trusts Law. She is now studying for a doctorate in Higher Education Management at the University of Bath.*

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Seven predictions for technology-enabled higher education

Sarah Porter

The world has seen some unimaginable changes in the last fifty years – and technology of various kinds has been at the heart of much of this change. Technology is a tremendous advantage in some contexts – connecting people, curing illnesses, boosting food production and solving problems. At the same time, technology can also have negative impacts – and also unforeseen consequences. I believe that higher education is currently at something of a turning point in its relationship with technology, so here are my predictions for the future to help universities stay ahead.

1. The concept of 'digital' will fade

Digital devices and content are already becoming a pervasive part of our lives. Ten years ago, we might have talked about a 'digital camera' – now, the adjective is obvious. For universities, colleges and skills tutors, this means that we need to go where our students are already, utilising tools like YouTube and other virtual environments, using these to help engage learners. At JISC, we are very aware of our responsibility towards our customers in looking ahead to what that post-'digital' world might look like.

2. There will be even more personalisation of technology

Users will increasingly have integrated devices that they use for many different social and leisure pursuits, as well as for learning and paid work. We've already seen that students like using devices they're familiar with, rather than having, say a separate device just for texts from their college or university. Ever-smarter devices will be worn, and be voice- and even brain-activated, giving users the ability to access content and services from the networked, immersive and multimedia environment in which they move. For example, students and staff at the University of Bristol can now access live bus timetables and campus information through their smartphones as they move around the university thanks to the JISC-funded MyMobileBristol app.

3. The boundaries between formal research and scholarship, and formal education and training, will become increasingly blurred

As the 'network effect' – the growing connections between people all around the world through all kinds of content – continues to expand, how content is created and shared will continue to grow in importance. Content and any associated learning opportunities will increasingly be contributed by 'anyone'. We've seen that work really well in the projects we fund where researchers ask people to contribute to collections – it could be an archive of First World War memorabilia to support historical research, or quirky Scottish words for linguistic analysis.

Users may also contribute to informal learning networks through content that they share, either as part of their formal research or through their informal interests and activities. For example if you do some voluntary charitable work, videos showing the skills that you have acquired might go towards your degree and be used by others. The process of doing research is also something we've shared, through platforms like MyExperiment.org which allows scientists to collaborate on workflows. We believe that where people need to break down the boundaries between subject disciplines, technology can help bring them together.

4. The 'added value' of face to face educational experiences will start to break down

As the quality of online content improves, and social technologies become ever more sophisticated, online learning will become a mainstream option, for example using high quality, low cost, multi-person video conferencing on mobile devices (e.g. look at Apple FaceTime or Google+ Hangouts). In a world where flexibility and choice are increasingly valuable, and where people are growing accustomed to complex social interactions through technical environments, students and their parents will be less focused upon a face-to-face experience and more interested in the other benefits that institutions can offer in terms of course choice, quality of support, flexibility and employability.

5. The digital environment will provide more opportunities for institutions to provide an enhanced and customised student experience

Intelligent, data-driven systems will work with the student to support them, to analyse their learning behaviour, and to propose resources that may help with areas of weakness or further develop areas of interest. Interactions between learners and tutors will be recorded and stored to allow review and replay. Data analysis will help tutors to provide customised learning plans, to identify particular capabilities as well as weaknesses or gaps, and to then use these to suggest employment routes, industry placements and mentors. Many libraries are using the everyday information they collect about library users in a measured and secure way to provide a better service for them. At the University of Huddersfield library users can get involved in a game online that shows them the most popular books for their course and how their peers are doing.

6. More organisations will accredit chunks of learning

As the formal boundaries around knowledge break down, and the ability to provide a good educational experience, without needing to invest in costly real estate, becomes more achievable, modular accreditation will grow. There will be more partnerships between commercial and non-commercial organisations, courses will be made available in more flexible formats, and online course materials will be supported by distributed networks of high quality support organisations – providing academic and pastoral support, advice on careers, practical experience of employment, facilitated access to peer networks and mentoring by other distributed networks.

7. Successful organisations will think about services, not systems

Organisational processes will only survive if they make the provider more competitive, able to offer higher quality experiences, more focused on the changing needs of learners – and whoever is paying for the educational experience. Institutional systems will need to be highly flexible and able to conduct real-time transactions with many partners and beneficiaries. Higher education professionals will need new skills in order to understand the potential and risks associated with new and sometimes unproven approaches. We will need to have the right balance of flexibility and agility to be able to cope with the demands of this exciting but challenging environment. We have to make sure that we're not using technology for technology's sake. We also have to be clear to our students and staff what the benefits are of any changes to our current provision. The battle for hearts and minds is sometimes the greatest challenge for senior managers looking to use new technologies. The opportunities to turn the UK into the go-to place for a seamless, technology enriched learning and research experience are huge.

Sarah Porter is JISC's Head of Innovation. Her work involves leading the strategic investment in research projects that promote new uses of technology for the benefit of education and research. Her particular interest is in how technology can help universities to innovate the day-to-day business of education and research – in particular the central importance of technology users, institutional processes and practices – to help higher education to respond to the ever-changing political, cultural and financial context.

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Fair access

Tessa Stone

In 2012 UK higher education is at a crossroads in terms of access. We hold our collective breath as we await the immediate impact of the new fee structure and student number controls, whilst attempting to predict the longer term consequences of the demise of Aimhigher and Connexions, the advent of Free Schools, and proposed changes to the A level curriculum, all set against the backdrop of economic recession and Plan A(usterity).

But if we are to secure the future of a higher education system that serves all those who might benefit from it, and ensure that students really are 'at the heart of the system' - there are three nettles that need to be grasped, now more than ever.

The first concerns the crucial role of higher education Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in facilitating access for non-traditional students. Whilst we may applaud in principle the government's intention to empower the student consumer by publishing 'more raw information from universities than ever before' it's utterly unclear in practice what students are going to *do* with the mass of available information in the absence of any coherent delivery system for advice and guidance. Because, just at the moment when it really matters that we get this right, the plug has been pulled on all the support systems simultaneously.

I won't dwell overly on the demise of Aimhigher here; although, since one consequence of an HE 'market' is that institutions will prioritise marketing over altruistic outreach, a national infrastructure with an explicit, cross-sector widening participation remit might seem worth having. No, there's another, parallel market being created in IAG that should arguably be causing as much concern from an access perspective.

England's Education Act 2011 sounded the death knell of the Connexions careers service, and devolved to schools the duty to provide 'access to impartial careers advice'. Whilst few would rush to reinstate Connexions and the provision of IAG has been problematic for years, it would take an article twice this length to outline the potentially disastrous impact that the implementation of this Act will have on those students who need expert advice and guidance the most.

Suffice it to say, students at schools that already do this well will continue to benefit from the enormous advantage that sound advice and guidance bestows. For those without access to such advice, the gulf will widen further. And whilst they may understandably rail against yet again having to make up for problems for which they are not responsible, universities will find themselves being asked to fill that gap, and at a time when the market imperative *they* face risks seeing focused recruitment trump broader and more impartial outreach work.

The second nettle is that of contextual data. Indeed, I would argue that universities need not only collectively to grasp it, but loudly to counter some media scare-mongering about 'social engineering' and 'dumbing down'.

However, I would sound a cautionary note from the perspective of potential students. As an applicant it might be good to know that any mitigating circumstances such as school background are fully understood and taken into account. However, it would also be good to know that they were understood, and taken into account, in the same way by each institution applied to. The issue is not just the use, or not, of a broad set of indicators known collectively as 'contextual data', but transparency about exactly which data is used, and a degree of consistency in the way it is used. As a former admissions tutor I am fully aware just how contentious this suggestion is, but I firmly believe that until we achieve that transparency and consistency we will not end the media scare-mongering about dumbing-down – or indeed be able to marshal a coherent response to complaints from those schools who feel they are being 'penalised' for being successful.

Finally the third, often overlooked, nettle is that of a student's success once at university. The view that universities have a magic levelling effect has been under-scrutinised, and whilst many are rightly worried that the huge hike in fees will prompt an increasingly utilitarian approach to higher education, one positive impact of the increased focus on the student experience is increased awareness of the fact that not everyone gets the same benefit from their course. I am not referring here to the debate about the 'quality' of one institution versus another – rather to the evidence that two students from different socio-economic backgrounds studying the same subject at the same university and achieving the same class of degree do *not* have equal job prospects. We are already seeing a greater focus on the role of university study in conferring 'employability skills' alongside subject knowledge, and for non-traditional students this is particularly important.

There are no silver bullets of course, but one smart approach that some of Brightside's university partners are taking is to provide combined initiatives that speak to a number of these issues. We provide an e-mentoring service that universities (and others) can embed into their outreach activities. This makes ongoing mentoring support available beyond the summer school or shadowing scheme, and as the thread that binds intermittent, face-to-face activities, and enables the delivery not just of information but also personalised advice in a timely and effective way. Moreover, our HEI partners are increasingly seeing this as a way not just of supporting outreach and providing volunteering opportunities for their undergraduates, but also of aiding retention and success (third years mentoring first years, for example) and promoting employability (such as recent graduates and local employers mentoring second and third years).

I once argued that charities like ours should be aiming for planned obsolescence; that the only real marker of success would be having worked ourselves out of a job. Sadly, however, no-one doubts that in the next few years universities – and organisations like ours that support them – are going to have to work harder and smarter than ever to facilitate access to and success through higher education for those from non-traditional backgrounds. I shan't be giving up the day job just yet.

Dr Tessa Stone *is Chief Executive of Brightside, and Chair of the Bridge Group.*

Brightside *is a national education charity which creates, develops and manages online mentoring and other online tools and resources to connect, inform and inspire more young people to achieve their full potential through education. Working alongside our partners in the higher education, business and charity sectors we mentored over 12,000 students through our schemes in the academic year 2010–11, whilst tens of thousands more benefited from our free online resources at www.brightknowledge.org and www.studentcalculator.org.uk*

The Bridge Group *is an independent non-partisan policy association promoting social mobility through higher education. The association offers specialist guidance on policy, drawing on the expertise of our professional network of associates and the collation of research and evaluation, and so seeks to bridge the gap between research, policy, and programme implementation.*