Misunderstanding Modern Higher Education: eight "category mistakes"

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<u>Introduction</u>

1. It is an uncomfortable truth that in comparative terms, and much as it may make us feel better to argue the opposite, especially in difficult times, in the UK we are a "lucky" system of higher education. Despite the pressures of a hyper-active political context, we have maintained a "buffer" between ourselves and the government of the day. The provision of the 1988 Education Reform Act that the Secretary of State cannot make a grant in respect of an individual institution remains in force (ERA, 134:7). We have broadly been well-funded at times, and less well-funded at others (HEPI, 2006). Public funding has not kept pace with expansion but it has increased in absolute terms decade after decade since the 1960s. Our levels of student satisfaction are relatively high compared to those in similar national sectors, although they may be slipping – for predictable reasons. The bar remains high on degree-awarding powers and University title, while – although they creak from time to time, the processes of mutual assurance of quality and standards remain intact. Until recently it was possible to say that we have had very few Millennium Dome or Terminal Five moments, when compared, say, to the National Health Service; given the long gaps between the Cardiff 's near bankruptcy, the Lancaster bond and then quality assurance at Thames Valley University (all of whom have recovered well). That may no longer be so, with the swift succession of disasters at London Metropolitan University, the University of Wales, and most recently the LSE.

2. However, we are now entering another one of those periods (the late 1970s and early 1980s were the last) when we need to be a smarter system.   We are facing another potential perfect storm: of national policy confusion (exacerbated by devolution), of funding uncertainty, and of diminished public confidence. Survival and prosperity will once again only securely be achieved – as they have been in the past – by taking responsibility for our own affairs.

<u>Category mistakes</u>

3. The Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle coined the term "category mistake" in his The Concept of Mind (1949). He talks about a "foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time." He is -

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"shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks 'But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.' It then has to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some visible counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which what he has already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their coordination is understood, the University has been seen."

4. This passage is interesting on a number of levels, especially historical (the priority of the Colleges, the salience of the Registrar, the absence of explicit reference to students, the apparent lack of lecture halls, the scientists "experimenting," and so on), but it is Ryle's first and strongest example of the "category mistake." The visitor mistakes the buildings for the concept: the infrastructure for the institution (Ryle, 1949: 17-18).

5. A classic dictionary defines the category mistake as follows: "a sentence that says one thing in one category that can only intelligibly be said of something of another, as when speaking of the mind located in space" (one of Ryle's targets was Cartesian dualism of the mind and the body). Another gives the example "what does blue smell like?"

6. At least eight such category mistakes are discernible in today's discourse about higher education, its problems and its prospects.

"University" performance

7. The first is about to what extent the individual university is the most sensible unit of analysis. Here we talk about the "university" when what is actually in question is the subject, professional area, or the system in which the institution sits. Courses, subjects and evolving inter- and multidisciplinary academic and professional fields, should count more than whole institutions (indeed a rather brittle, un-self-aware species of institutional pride can be a real problem). Think about the so-called difference between "recruiting" and "selecting" universities. This makes sense in terms of courses, but only rarely for whole institutions. Examples are health and medicine, art and design, engineering and technology, which often share developmental problems across the sector more than they do with other disciplines in the same institution. The UK National Student Survey has shown, for example, that differences in response between subjects – across all institutions – are much more marked (and statistically reliable) than differences between institutional aggregates (Ramsden, et al. 2010: para. 16.3).

Access

8. The second is about the admissions dilemma: is it about the pursuit of "excellence," or more about "social mobility," or even "social justice"? Here we talk about "widening participation" as if it is the same as so-called "fair access," and vice versa. The two are logically separable phenomena. The first – getting more students qualified and to the starting-gate - is a big problem. The second –where they choose to apply, and are admitted - is a comparatively tiny problem. Merging the two can also lead to empirically weak and socially patronizing conclusions. For example, there is the related category mistake of the Sutton Trust in stating that well-qualified students choosing courses (and institutions) outside the golden circle of the "Sutton 13" top universities (all from the Russell and 94 groups) are "wasted talent" (Sutton Trust, 2008). Many of the alternative choices made by well-qualified non-standard students are profoundly life-enhancing.

The higher education "sector"

9. The third is about the scope of the "sector" from the points of view of policy, of practice, and, critically, of self-image. This concerns talking about "higher" when we should be talking about "tertiary" education. In gross terms – and not withstanding the wobbles we have seen recently in terms of so-called "dual sector" provision (when what is called in the UK "further" education, or in Australia Technical and Further Education [TAFE] takes place in the same institution as HE) - it is "tertiary" (including higher education) rather than exclusively "higher" education that matters to society at large. The emerging question internationally is how both higher and further education sit within frameworks of life-long learning (Schuller and Watson, 2009). As an extreme example of new formations, the University of Peshawar in northern Pakistan sustains all levels of learning from nursery school to PhD (see http://www.upesh.edu.pk/about_uop.html). Charles Darwin University in Australia's Northern Territory holds wonderful open-air awards ceremonies recognizing everything from certificates in adult literacy to doctorates (Watson et al., 2011: 46).

Research "selectivity"

10. Next there is the myth of research concentration. This is not just about the stark conclusion that in the UK we have concentrated public funding of research to the point where it has become dysfunctional, but also talking about institutional research intensity when we should be talking about inter-institutional collaboration. As university leaders, policy-makers and funders focus on league tables and so-called competitive advantage they are actually being undermined by the scientific community's ever-increasing tendency to cross boundaries. This is how the Royal Society summarises the position:

"The scientific world is becoming increasingly interconnected, with international collaboration on the rise. Today over 35% of articles published in international journals are internationally collaborative, up from 25% 15 years ago.

The primary driver of most collaboration is the scientists themselves. In developing their research and finding answers, scientists are seeking to work with the best people, institutions and equipment which complement their research, wherever they may be.

The connections of people, through formal and informal channels, diaspora communities, virtual global networks and professional communities of shared interests are important drivers of international collaboration. These networks span the globe. Motivated by the bottom-up exchange of scientific insight, knowledge and skills, they are changing the focus of science from the national to the global level. Yet little is understood about the dynamics of networking and the mobility of scientists, how these affect global science and how best to harness these networks to catalyse international collaboration (RS, 2001:6)."

11. Locally (in the UK) this should cause us to think long and hard about the upcoming Research Evaluation Framework (REF). Two outcomes are certain. Hyper-concentration of funding in the hands of a few "QR (quality-related)-winners" will continue: four HEIs will continue to scoop about 30% of the spoils, and up to 23 about 75%.   As a result we shall have to learn to live with a two-tier system. This division will not, incidentally, simply recreate the binary line: "old universities" without medical schools will mostly be outside the charmed circle; "new universities" will be well-placed to prosper in the second tier.

12. The main effect of the REF will be to freeze funding in a state set somewhere between 2001 and 2007.   Moreover, this appears to be the basic policy intention: much of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) consultation about setting up the scheme was about "stability" and avoiding "perturbation".

13. Two tiers will represent a policy trap for various reasons. Entry to the top tier will become virtually impossible. New combinations of subjects (and institutional partnerships) – the very stuff of "foresight" at its best - will wither in this part of the sector. Above all, a radically divided system represents a counsel of despair: the best of what we have now is the best we can ever hope for.

14. Life among the QR winners will not, however, be a bed of roses. The real value of "dual support" has been in steady decline since 1992, and genuine FEC (full economic costing) remains out of reach (Adams and

Smith, 2007). Missions here will become narrower as internal concentration of resource mirrors external funding. They will also be increasingly dominated by medicine and science; not least because funding required to "match" investments in science and technology will progressively bleed the arts and humanities.

15. The favoured institutions will find themselves more and more operating against the grain of a "mode 2" world of knowledge creation and exchange. There will be disincentives to participate in academic partnerships which dilute the citation denominator (exacerbated, for example, by the treatment of group authorship as a single unit for the purpose of excluding self-citation). It is also likely that the QR-winners' relative decline in the ability to "gear" or "leverage" public money into private support will continue.

16. As for the rest of the institutions, life outside an inflexible and backwards-looking QR-winners' circle will have its compensations, as well as some ongoing challenges. The most important task will be to "right-size" an approach to their own morsels of QR, that recognises their relative contribution to a wider pool of research funding. Meanwhile a concerted effort must be made to demonstrate that institutional reputations (including for research) can be made away from an RAE/REF which will cease to be "the only game in town." Such reputations will depend upon catching a number of waves: the increasing importance of the creative and service economies; a renewed interest in "liberal" values in undergraduate education that fuses the research and teaching agenda; a similar demand for "translational" research or what the surgeon Anul Gawande calls in his Better the "science of performance" (Gawande, 2007).

17. Together these developments will offer an alternative, forward-looking definition of "research intensity." Above all, they will mean adapting to a world of wider and deeper collaboration, in which at many of its scholarly frontiers the isolated institution is no longer the power it once was.

World-classness

18. Fifthly, this links directly with the madness of supposedly "world class" provision, especially as identified by international whole-institution league tables. At present both politicians and institutional leaders (the latter should know better) are obsessed with a poorly designed concept of comparative "world classness" when they ought to be talking about geographically specific "engagement." What governments say they want from higher education systems represents almost the opposite of what the international league tables they also exhort us to climb actually measure (see Salmi and Altbach, 2011).

19. Here are two starkly different lists: of what governments at a variety of different levels say they want higher education to do and what the "world-class" tables rely upon.

20. What doesn't count in international league tables is:

- Teaching quality
- Social mobility
- Services to business and the community
- Rural interests
- Other public services
- Collaboration
- The public interest

21. What does count is -

- Research
- Media interest
- Graduate destinations
- Infrastructure
- International "executive" recruitment

22. Despite Herculean efforts everything reduces to peer-reviewed research and, as suggested above, even that is problematic because of the inexorable rise of collaborative outcomes at the very highest levels of achievement.   An example is the recently remodelled Times Higher Education World Rankings, 2011-2012. 60% of the inputs are claimed to be generated by research "volume, income, reputation and influence" and 30% for "teaching." When you drill down, however, you discover that 70.5% of the whole data set is driven by research-based activity (THE, 2010: 28-29).

The public/private divide

23. Next, there is no clear blue water now (if there ever was) between the "public" and the "private" sectors; what often makes the difference is how the private sector can be used for public purposes. Meanwhile we have the ironic phenomenon that as universities are urged to be more "business-like" (admittedly on a rather out-moded version of what complex "business" actually consists of), many successful businesses are becoming more "university-like." The whole domain of open source software illustrates this while other specific examples of companies include Whole Foods, W.L. Gore, Google and Linux (Hamel, 2007: 72, 95, 107, 111, 207-209).

Informed choice

24. Penultimately, we have to ask the hard question about who is really running the show? What students want and need can confound the most sophisticated policy frameworks, where spokespersons react to what they regard as irrational choices by prescribing more and decreasingly plausible "information." Look at the ways in which student demand led the systems of the "developed" world towards meeting the needs of the cultural,

creative and service economies. Their ICT requirements (where they are normally ahead of their teachers) compound this. The UK system provides ample evidence of how (despite political voices to the contrary) a market does exist. Indeed student choices – of subjects, of institutions, and of mode of study – could be said very substantially to have moulded the system as we have it today. That is why so many supply-side STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) initiatives have failed (the same is not true in the developing world [Nuffield Foundation, 2008]). That is why there is a slow but inexorable move towards studying closer to the family home. And that is why institutions (like the Open University), which hold out the prospect of earning while learning, are increasingly popular.

Reputation and quality

25. Choice of institution is also a contested element, and leads to a final category mistake: the confusion of reputation and quality. In the United States, Andrew Delbanco concludes that "the 'quality gap' between private and public universities is much smaller than the gap in reputation" (Delbanco 2007). Evidence is growing in developed systems that students are choosing "reputation" over "quality" in selecting universities, and that as long as employers screen for the same thing they are acting rationally in doing so.

26. These data and these conclusions are mirrored in the UK. The Higher Education Policy Institute's surveys of student classroom experience in 2006, 2007 and 2009 observed "the new universities if anything making more provision and in smaller classes than the old, and less likely to use graduate students as teachers" (HEPI, 2009: para. 10). While critics have raced to comment that the older universities are more likely to have graduate students available, the impact is confirmed by other reports. The ESRC's Teaching and Learning Programme's project SOMUL (the Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning) concluded that "you won't necessarily learn more if you go to a posh place" (SOMUL, 2005), while similar results have been reported more recently by Paul Ashwin (Ashwin et al., 2011).

27. The public discourse is heavily dominated at present by a perception (whether welcomed or deprecated) of student instrumentalism. What counts is "employability" (even more than "employment") and whether or not students are prepared for it. Meanwhile students themselves confound expectation further: not just in choice of subject of study (as above), but by delaying their entry into the job market (when they can), by being much less spooked about debt than their parents (Surowieki, 2011), by returning to volunteering (even while they simultaneously have to work much more frequently for money than their predecessors) and by reviving student-led political activism (all around the world).

<u>What is to be done?</u>

28. Putting this all together, crudely it means that if our system is going to succeed it will have to become messier, less precious, more flexible, and significantly more cooperative. If you want a worked example, we are going have to be more like one half of the North American system.

29. To attempt to explain, politicians and commentators who look at the USA generally fixate on one or other of two models: Harvard or the California Master-plan. (Incidentally, each of these is in desperate trouble at present, for differing economic reasons.) This polarity contains a fundamental principle, concealed by the "national average" data put out by the OECD and others. A little less than half of American undergraduate students go to four-year public or private residential colleges and universities and a respectable proportion complete their degrees on time. Meanwhile the other more than half has a much messier route. They invariably complete their Bachelor's degrees in institutions other than the ones in which they start, with gaps, with a mixture of full- and part-time study, a lot of experience of earning while learning, and above all by accumulating credit for what they achieve along the way. Because of the success of this messier system, about 60% of the population has a serious experience of tertiary study, and in popular culture "college" is positively referenced and valued. The UK system has to learn to emulate this. Instead in policy, funding and public perceptions of HE it looks to lock in all of the features of the wrong half. The unsustainable mess we have argued our way into about fees is absolutely characteristic of this.

30. Our principal failure in HE practice - to make Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATS) work – provides another powerful example of this. In 2002–3, over 11,000 of the 300,000 students who entered HE institutions did so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years. The vast majority of these students received no credit for their previous studies (HEPI, 2004).

31. The flexibility which a proper credit framework brings will be needed all the more in the light of current economic turbulence and the effects this is having on employment. Large numbers of adults will be seeking to improve their qualifications without having to commit themselves to a long stretch of full-time education. This is not a technical issue: we have the systems. It is a cultural and moral issue: we fail to use these systems for reasons of conservatism, snobbery and lack of imagination.

32. So what else should we do, in addition to cooperating better on access and progression? Beginning by tackling the category mistakes set out here would represent a commitment to learning to live with flux and contingency.

33. Returning to where this paper started, the system we have today is hugely better than the one which was declared to be broken in the context of the last national economic crisis of the 1970s, on all sorts of measures, including productivity and social justice. We mended and improved it then, largely in spite of rather than with the assistance of the governments of the day. Let us hope we can do it again.

Note

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