Return on investment? How universities communicate with the outside world

Richard Garner
With a Foreword from Alistair Jarvis

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About the Author

Richard Garner is the UK's longest serving education correspondent, having worked on the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, the *Times Educational Supplement*, the *Mirror* and the *Independent* between 1980 and 2016. He now freelances and is back writing a column for the *Times Educational Supplement*. His book, *The Thirty Years War: My Life Reporting on Education*, appeared in November 2016.

Foreword

Alistair Jarvis, Deputy Chief Executive, Universities UK

The relationship between the media and universities is complex, at times challenging but certainly mutually beneficial. For the media, universities provide a rich source of original and varied stories. For universities, in an age where the media (in its increasingly numerous and varied forms) are the dominant source of public information, this relationship is arguably more important now than ever.

In this fascinating paper, Richard Garner provides insight to the changing nature of the education media and university public relations teams. Drawing on over 35 years' experience as a leading education journalist, Richard reflects on what university issues are of most interest to the media, examines the varying and evolving approaches of public relations professionals in higher education and considers whether universities receive the coverage they deserve.

Looking to the future, Richard highlights the major challenges facing universities that will continue to be covered heavily in the media – Brexit, migration policy and the impact of lifting the student numbers cap – and considers what these mean for the education media and university public relations professionals.

Drawing on the issues that Richard raises in his lively commentary and analysis, there are four trends that I have observed that are playing a significant part in shaping –

indeed redefining – the relationship between the media and universities in the years ahead.

Firstly, most people no longer choose to rely on a single preferred source of news – instead they 'snack' from several sources – regularly accessing news from professional media outlets and social media sources. This approach drives demand for, and is made possible by, a growing variety of media types and an increasing number of media outlets. The media's appetite for original (and even sometimes less original) stories is high and growing. A far greater amount of content is being published, including a growing breadth of types and styles. The growth and popularity of social media and written online news sites are perhaps the most obvious. However, the growth in published audio and video news content is just as significant, with universities now regularly featuring in podcasts and vodcasts. The wide range of specialist media across a variety of platforms is changing the relationship between universities and the media. Higher education is now covered in a wide variety of blogs, including at www.hepi.ac.uk. Some are professional media operations, others written by enthusiastic amateurs. Specialist news is increasingly popular, often provided directly to email inboxes via daily and weekly e-newsletters. Gone are the days when a university press office was limited to pitching interviews to a weekly printed sector paper, a small number of education writers at broadsheet national papers, a few radio and TV news outlets and their local media.

Two interesting examples of new education media over the last

few years are *The Conversation* and *Wonkhe*. *The Conversation* works with university partners to publish articles authored by academics and edited by journalists on topical news issues. It has teams based in the UK, Australia, France, USA and South Africa, each with news websites with a geographic focus but also with content shared across the different sites. Access to the content is free and they actively encourage content to be republished, which it frequently is, in national publications and specialist media. *Wonkhe* is an online blog site providing detailed analysis of higher education policy and politics. Content is written by contributing authors and an in-house team in a variety of formats. It would have been bold to predict a few years ago that a blog specialising in content for higher education 'wonks' would grow to be a successful business with a broad readership from universities, policymakers and key influencers.

The growth in media outlets allows more opportunities for universities to find places to place stories. It also poses significant challenges, including a far greater number of media enquiries to manage and a pressing need to adapt content to suit the different channels.

Secondly, the internationalisation of the media is having a sizeable impact. British universities increasingly feature in the international media, indeed in a digital-first age, it is difficult to define media as being for a readership in any single country. The increasingly international focus is perhaps best demonstrated by the growth of international coverage in, and readership of,

the *Times Higher Education* alongside the development of their successful World University Rankings.

Thirdly, media relations are now only a small (albeit still important) part of universities' approach to public relations. The 'press office function' is now most often embedded within much larger external relations departments as part of an integrated communications approach. Press offices are rarely no longer just homes for former print journalists focussed on writing press releases and pitching interviews to the traditional media. The modern press office includes staff with skills in social media, producing video or audio content, writing for blogs and the web, with an expectation that they will work in close partnership with colleagues across the wider external relations portfolio on joined-up campaigns. This integrated approach brings together professionals with expertise in digital and social media, web content, events, marketing, student recruitment, staff and student communications, public engagement with research, community engagement, internal (staff) communications, alumni relations, development, political affairs and more. With this integrated approach the media is no longer viewed as the priority audience, rather the traditional media is one option among many channels which can be selected to reach a desired audience. There are times when a well-placed (or misplaced) Tweet can have greater impact than placing a news story in a major national paper.

Fourthly, we are beginning to see the rise of senior communications professionals at university top tables. It is now

not unusual to see Directors of Communications, Marketing, or External Relations on university leadership teams. Some universities have gone a step further by creating new senior leadership team roles, such as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (External) or Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Corporate Communications). Good communications is an important part of addressing many of the key challenges that universities face: from recruiting students, to public engagement with research and impact, to knowledge transfer, to strengthening reputation in an increasingly competitive market, to profile among funders, to communicating with students to improve their experience and to enhancing reputation to rise up league tables. Vice-chancellors increasingly recognise that investment in professional external relations staff has many benefits. Communications, including relationships with the media, has strategic importance to the overall success of a university.

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Introduction

At a conservative estimate, there are at least 600 people working in university public relations departments trying to promote their institution's image in the media.

Put another way, that means the 159 higher education institutions in the UK are forking out around £20 million a year in salaries to get their message across.

However, if you include business schools and research-led institutes, who will often have their own public relations teams, the number of employees could be well over 1,000 people.

This is without even considering those employed in marketing and internal communications departments who are striving towards a similar end.

In other words, there is heavy investment by universities in ensuring they promote a good image of themselves. Indeed, all these posts are more crucial to universities than they have ever been before. With the lifting of the cap on student numbers, there is far more competition between institutions over admissions. Moreover, there are more demands on research-active staff to display their 'impact'.

The role of the public relations officer has expanded to cover social media as well as the traditional media. This expansion has forced academics to think about how to get their message across in a more succinct and accessible way. Gone, hopefully, are the days I encountered while working as Education Editor of the *Independent*, when I asked an academic to write a 1,200-word piece on his research on testing primary school pupils:

'What I know about primary school testing could not possibly be encapsulated into 1,200 words', came the reply.

'That's a pity', I said. 'The page only has room for 1,200 words.'

We were at an impasse. Now that academic could be composing a 140-character intervention on Twitter.

The question that must be asked, though, is whether this expansion of promotional posts has resulted in universities getting more bang for their bucks. From my experience on the other side of the fence, the answer is they could do much better.

Doing it well and doing it badly

Talk to professionals from the world of university public relations and a picture emerges of how they perceive the media treats them. A common theme is that there is too much concentration on the 24-strong Russell Group of universities and, in particular, Oxford and Cambridge. It is easy to see why that is the case. Recent research from the Sutton Trust, the education charity that campaigns for equal access to educational opportunities for all sectors of society, showed a majority of senior editorial jobs on the UK's national newspapers were occupied by former graduates not of the Russell Group as a whole, but the two oldest universities within that group of 24 – Oxford and Cambridge. Its latest report on the educational backgrounds of leading figures in a range of careers shows 54 per cent of top journalists have degrees from Oxford or Cambridge. Add to that the fact that Michael Gove – in particular – in his time as Education Secretary promoted the view that attending a Russell Group university was the pinnacle of a student's career and that no other universities mattered half as much. In other words, a very elitist view of education dominates the media. Many in the higher education sector argue that if leading journalists came from a wider range of backgrounds, the spoils of media success would be more fairly shared between institutions.

I agree with this thesis perhaps because – while I may not qualify as a leading journalist under the Sutton Trust's rule of thumb – I bucked the Oxbridge trend quite spectacularly. The only contact I had with post-school education was with a further education college – Harlow College, which ran a year's pre-entry training course for journalists. However, had I been

setting out on my career now rather than in 1969 I would undoubtedly have had a better chance of success had I gone to a Russell Group university. I certainly would have had to make more effort to secure myself a university place. It is intriguing to note that when I first applied to the *Times Educational Supplement* for a job in the late 1970s, I received a curt note back saying the paper did not employ non-graduates. It took its shutdown for a year and a consequent shortage of staff as it reopened to reverse that trend. Market forces in other words.

Even if the Russell Group does attract the lion's share of attention, does it necessarily follow that its members think the coverage is to their advantage? Ask the Russell Group and the answer would be an emphatic no. One of their constant themes in the past few years has been that too much of the blame for the lack of social mobility in the UK university system is attached to their universities. They argue that schools should shoulder a major part of the blame for putting their students in for the wrong A-Level subjects and that the media do not pay enough attention to this. It is one of the reasons why a list of facilitating subjects – to help a student's passage to an elite university – was drawn up. Schools, they argue, put students in for subjects they consider easier so they can improve their ranking in performance tables – rather than those that are most likely to give them access to a 'top' university.

In a speech to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations education skills group's annual awards ceremony, Wes Streeting, the former president of the National Union of Students and now a Labour MP, acknowledged this was an argument commonly made by Russell Group members. However, he added that if

anyone were to suggest that, as a result, government cash to help widening participation should be taken away from universities and given to schools, there would be howls of anguish from the university sector. In fact, this move away from funds going to higher education has already started but there are some in university circles who fear it could go further. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case – and there is merit on each side of the argument – it is an issue that will not go away. The Government – in fact all governments over the past two decades – have constantly banged the drum for more social mobility in the university system. As a result of the political focus on the issue, headlines like 'Oxbridge snubs disadvantaged pupils' will continue to appear as long as the figures back them up.

Social mobility is a key interest of the media – leading to a debate over whether you should admit disadvantaged pupils to universities on a lower-tariff than those from more affluent backgrounds. The rationale is that if they struggle to cope in a downtown secondary school and live on a run-down estate with little support for their education, then they have probably had to work harder to gain three As at A-Level than someone at a well-heeled independent school. Some universities have experimented with lower offers for disadvantaged pupils and there is research showing they are likely to gain higher degree passes than those that breezed in from more affluent backgrounds with the same or even higher qualifications.

From a media point of view it is a red rag to a bull to adopt this policy in the UK though. You may enjoy support from, say, the *Guardian*, and I always thought there was merit in the argument,

but the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph* will rail against you as will the representatives of the independent school sector, who are worried that parents might not pay their fees if they find themselves at a disadvantage in securing a university place for their child. Bristol suffered from a boycott by independent schools when it backed differential offers. If you do intend to go down this route, it would be best to back your decision up by searching out detailed research ideally for your own institution (or a comparable one) that shows this could lead to improved degree passes.

So, if the Russell Group gains the lion's share of the coverage, where does that leave the rest of the university sector? MillionPlus, which promoted itself as a higher education think tank for many years and now describes itself as the Association for Modern Universities, believes much of its universities' work is ignored by the media. The organisation first launched in 1997 as the Coalition of Modern Universities and later changed to the Campaign for Mainstream Universities, before adopting its present moniker in 2007 on the grounds that its member institutions educated over a million students. The modern universities it represents are many of the former polytechnics granted university status in the early 1990s and it achieved more success media-wise after adopting the think tank formula.

However, its outgoing Chief Executive, Pam Tatlow, believes the concentration on the Russell Group means that – in particular – important work its members have done in developing the high-level skills needed by industry (which were part of the deal to persuade Nissan to stay in the UK post-Brexit) have been ignored. She agrees that the concentration on the Russell Group stems in part from the Michael Gove era 'where the idea

that you didn't count as higher education unless you were one of the Russell Group of universities was promoted … I think it is a real disservice to say that the only universities that are worth something are the Russell Group', she said.

From a wider perspective, she believes the higher education sector also has to cope with problems within the media itself when it comes to getting coverage: 'They're obviously besotted with schools', she said, 'and I think what's happened is the education journalist's brief has been minimised. There are no longer higher education specialists and those that are left have to get things up online before concentrating on their papers.' She cites the example of the *Telegraph* – where one correspondent now covers both the daily and Sunday papers as well as contributing online. I sympathise with her argument. When I first started at the *Independent* in 2001, there were five of us in the education team – myself as Education Editor, plus a deputy, an editor for our education supplement and a higher education specialist as well as – riches abound! – an admin assistant. At one stage, it came down to just me – I may have lost the 24-page education supplement (littered with freelance contributions) to a two-page spread (where a feature and a column were written largely by me because there was no budget to pay for anyone else). However, I also had to write for both the daily and Sunday editions and the *i* newspaper too (the offshoot of the *Independent*). Ms Tatlow says her members are now ploughing more effort into social media coverage, with the number of hits engendered by items being more important than how many inches your press release earns you in the national media.

All this, though, should not be construed as a counsel of despair for non-Russell Group universities when dealing with the media. One area in which they can score is by scouring through their students to see if there is an inspiring story in their midst. It is almost guaranteed there will be. My favourite university-based story during my 36 years covering education in national publications comes from what was then called the University of North London and is now London Metropolitan University, which has had its share of problems in terms of media coverage in the past few years.

Christine Wilkinson had slept rough on the streets for 32 years as a 'bag lady'. She had endured countless beatings and had been raped. She had been in and out of prison and mental hospitals and had three children (by different men) taken away from her. She was at the end of her tether and sought the help of a counsellor through a shelter where she was staying. The counsellor saw that she had been a bright pupil at a grammar school in her teens and suggested a college course for her. It all ended up with her obtaining a first-class degree in the humanities. This came to light through a resourceful public relations officer who thought long and hard about where to place the story. He thought it had *Daily Mirror* written all over it and I was working for that publication at the time. Following the publicity, she was invited on to BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour and ended up writing a book about her experiences. Success!

Another story I remember also comes from my days at the *Mirror*. The Sutton Trust had just been founded as a charity by the millionaire philanthropist, Sir Peter Lampl. In its infancy, its first priority was seeking to promote the idea that more pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds should be encouraged to

apply to Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities. Again, through their public relations manager, we ran a coupon in the paper so that parents could put their children's names forward to attend summer schools run by the charity at Oxford and Cambridge, to try and take some of the mystique away from these institutions and plant in pupils' minds the idea that it would be worth them applying. (The application needed the support of a teacher at the pupil's school to give the whole exercise more educational credibility.)

As a result, 135 pupils applied to attend the summer schools, 17 were selected to attend and four obtained places at Oxbridge. Modest, perhaps, but a start in breaking down the barriers nevertheless. Of course, this scheme was aimed at the Russell Group end of universities but the formula is an interesting one for any university to consider: why not consider liaising with your local newspaper over a similar idea to encourage disadvantaged students in your own locality to raise their horizons?

I can also remember – at the *Independent* this time – reporting on schemes where universities were encouraging primary school pupils from disadvantaged areas to attend universities for a day – at Leicester and Aston in particular – to encourage the thinking that a university education might be for them. Pictures of primary school pupils in a university setting are a sure-fire hit when trying to attract media attention. Why not invite a journalist to sit in on a primary school pupil's experience of a day spent at university?

Also, if Oxbridge wishes to demystify itself, I can recommend the example set by Churchill College, Cambridge, a few years

ago when it opened up its admissions process to a reporter from the *Guardian* and gave him access to meetings where the decisions on whom to admit were taken. What emerged was how much thought went into the admissions process. In one case, an applicant whom had won a scholarship to a UK sixth-form college but had done most of his schooling in a country with a poor education record was given a place. It was accepted that he would be monitored closely to avoid him falling behind in his studies. It was a much more reasoned assessment of the role of admissions tutors than we get from annual surveys highlighting the more ridiculous questions asked during the interview process. What made it successful were the references to the personal journeys made by some of the students. Other colleges please take note.

The inescapable fact to emerge from most of these examples is that the media like human interest stories and every institution has good enough tales to attract their attention, if only they look hard enough for them. Universities should adopt the effective approach used by the Association of Colleges on A-Level and GCSE results days. Hardly a year goes by without a genuine refugee being discovered from one of the world's most troubled spots who arrived in the UK without a smattering of English and ended up two years later with top grade passes at A-Level and – sometimes – a place at a Russell Group university. Such stories are invaluable in helping to persuade those from disadvantaged communities that they can aspire to a place on a degree course if they try.

Research is also a fruitful source for publicity for universities and one to which many institutions do not pay enough attention. The difficulty, from the media's point of view, is that too much

research follows the line of 'on the one hand this ... on the other hand that' rather than coming to a definite conclusion. Researchers also joke that much of their work ends with the recommendation that more research needs to be done – although perhaps that finding is a little bit too near the truth to be a joke. Such a conclusion is very difficult, if not impossible, to portray in media terms. It is worth reading through the text of the research and seeing if there are any interesting facts that could be highlighted. One such example of this was in a report published by the *Observer* a few months ago. It cited two research programmes carried out by Keith Topping, Professor of Educational and Social Research at the University of Dundee, which revealed that boys tend to miss some sections of a book as they skim read through it. Some pages, it added, are skipped altogether. Girls, on the other hand, are far more methodical in their reading habits. The upshot is that boys are less likely to have understood what they have read and this is true whether they come from a disadvantaged background or better-off middle-class homes.

It was an interesting finding – especially as the sample for the studies was substantial (852,295 pupils in 3,243 schools for the first study and 150,220 in 967 schools for the second). The recommendation, though, was: 'We are not saying read hundreds of classics and everything will be all right. They need to read challenging books in a subject they're interested in.' Not the stuff of which instant headlines are made but what emerged during the research certainly was. The story took over almost the whole of page three in the newspaper.

Researchers, though, are not prone to liking brash headlines so it is best for public relations staff to prepare them for the likely

outcome of their research appearing in the media (newspapers, TV and radio). It is true the coverage of their work may be given a more definite (or even in some researchers' eyes) more sensational presentation than they would have wanted. They should be primed for what might happen and how they can assist the process of shining a light on what they have done. For instance, you will probably never get more than two-and-a-half minutes if you are asked to appear on BBC Radio 4's Today programme but it reaches a mass audience – there is no time to stand on ceremony and insist on telling the audience how professionally the work was carried out.

I remember a colleague of mine taking up a post at a university where there was one head of department (Professor Alan Smithers, Director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham) who had been one of the most successful academics in attracting media interest in his work. She was confronted by a number of his fellow academics insisting she get them equal media time to Professor Smithers. She had to tell them it was not as easy as that – that Professor Smithers had devoted time and effort to ensuring he was always contactable by the media and to picking the most significant point in his research.

In schools, a similar profile has been attained by Sir Anthony Seldon, firstly as headmaster of leading independent school Brighton College and then Wellington College and now as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham. A word of warning, though, to budding Smithers or Seldons – envy can kick in with the result you are not always the most popular academic in the eyes of your colleagues. The importance of research contracts to universities has created the need for a closer bond between

academics and the media as recognised by Mark Carrigan in his book, *Social Media for Academics*, in which he concludes: 'The need to make a case for the value of research creates pressure for academics, or at least some of them, to build relationships with the media.'

As indicated earlier, preparing academics for how their research will be treated is essential. Happily, compared to a few years ago, many more universities are laying on media training for staff who are likely to appear in print or before the cameras. For university media staff, it is a question of prioritising what they should be doing. I know of one public relations official who – upon taking up a post – found that most of their time was spent answering questions from the local press about rowdy public behaviour in the town's bars and High Street during the evenings. Of course, it is essential to maintain good relations with the local media (and the local townsfolk) on issues like this, but it seems to me that more universities could benefit from the strategy adopted at Loughborough University, where problems like these are handled by a community relations officer, freeing up other staff to spend more time earning the university a national profile.

Another staple diet in the relationship between universities and the media is league tables. There are a plethora of them and many academics will tell you they find them boring, largely uninformative and that the world would be a better place if they did not exist. However, put their university at the top of any league table and a different attitude emerges. They (or their hierarchy to be more precise) want to milk it for all it is worth. It is not unknown for people to attend learned seminars at the UCL Institute of Education (IoE) on the problems league tables

can cause while being surrounded by banners proclaiming the IoE is the best place in the world to study Education.

It reminds me of what happened when the first school league tables came out. I was at the *Daily Mirror* at the time and – in line with the Labour Party's then line – we decided that we would not publish them. They were misleading, or so the argument went, and did not give a true reflection of a school's worth. We still had to write a story about them, though, so I gathered together a printed version of the tables and put it on the desk beside me to refer to as I wrote my story. I lost track of the number of senior executives and reporters who queued up to look at them in order to find out how their son or daughter's school had fared. A wry smile formed on my lips. 'These league tables aren't going to go away if there is such a thirst for the knowledge in them', I thought. Needless to say, the following year we published them and the Labour Party changed its stance over them, too. In other words, we ignored them at our peril. The same is true of higher education league tables.

When David Willetts was Universities Minister he outlined his vision for higher education and said he would like to see a sector where particular universities concentrated on being 'the best' in one subject area, i.e. specialist institutions, rather than trying to come top in every category. We are beginning to witness this in the coverage of the league tables. The University of Worcester, for instance, has carved out a niche for itself as having one of the most successful employment records for its graduates, thanks to its range of carefully-vetted internship and work experience programmes. The Open University has a remarkably consistent record of doing well in student satisfaction. For the vast majority of individual universities, it is

a question of probing the minutiae of the league tables to find out what – if anything – they excel at. Leave it to the Oxfords and Cambridges of this world to worry about whether they have fallen from third to fourth in a world-ranking league table.

The future

Now let us look to the future: what is it that will be exciting the media in terms of higher education stories in the coming weeks and months and how can universities best deal with the demands placed upon them?

Obviously, the major theme will be the impact of Brexit on the sector. It is easy to see why. According to official statistics, there are 125,000 students from European Union countries at the UK's 159 publicly-funded higher education institutions – roughly 5.5 per cent of the total number of students. They bring in about £3.7 billion a year to the UK economy and it is estimated that 34,000 jobs depend on them. Around 200,000 UK students have benefited from the Erasmus programme – which entails spending a period of their study on the Continent. In addition, about 15 per cent of total EU research grants end up in UK universities. About 15 per cent of the staff at UK universities come from EU states too. Early statistics seem to show there has been a drop-off in the number of EU students wanting to come to UK universities. Unfortunately, the Government's pledge that funding arrangements for 2017 would not be affected for EU students came too late to calm nerves. 'If we really want to reassure students for 2018, we need to be addressing the issue now', said one press officer. 'In countries like Poland and Spain, say, students who would be starting their university courses in 2018 are studying for their equivalent of A-levels now. Now is the time that they are thinking about where they want to go.'

On speaking to a press officer for Universities UK, the umbrella body which represents all UK universities, he told me he was fielding calls every day from journalists asking what the impact

of Brexit on universities would be. There will, therefore, be no difficulty in placing stories about that in the media. There is no difficulty, either, in placing stories about the Government's attempts to clamp down on immigration – which is obviously connected to Brexit. One concern mentioned recently was about a suggestion in Home Office and Foreign Office circles that foreign students might be restricted to certain universities – i.e. the more elite members of the Russell Group.

'You can see how that comes about', said one public relations official. As with the background of senior journalists revealed by the Sutton Trust, those in the highest echelons of the civil service are more likely to have an Oxbridge background and therefore more likely to think these are the only institutions that really matter. The figures show 51 per cent of senior civil servants have an Oxbridge degree. 'There's a high percentage of senior executives who only have experience of a handful of universities', he said. 'Happily – that attitude is not so prevalent in the Department for Education where they are a bit more thoughtful. Wiser counsels will hopefully prevail.' It is nevertheless an issue which will get media attention in the coming months and one which the world of higher education must be prepared to take on in its attempts to get its message across.

At the moment, of course, we do not know precisely what impact Brexit will have on the UK higher education market. The warnings from the Remain campaign during the referendum debate were dire. From what we can now glean, there will be no change to the status of EU nationals signing on for courses in this academic year and the next. A so called 'hard'

Brexit, however, could mean the end of participation in the Erasmus programme, make it more difficult for universities to recruit staff from abroad and involve a significant loss of research funding for UK institutions. In their relations with the media, UK universities would do well to bring any impact along these lines to public attention. They should, however, also be looking for opportunities to publicise any initiatives they are taking to offset the impact of Brexit. For instance, as Professor Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, has said: 'You can imagine a situation post-Brexit where UK universities are operating as aggressively in Europe as they are in China and India and elsewhere.' This was taken to mean leading UK universities would be setting up their own campuses in EU countries – using their brand image to attract students who may be put off in future if they have to pay full international student fees to attend a university course based in the UK itself.

Sir David Greenaway, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nottingham and Chairman of the Russell Group, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, urged his fellow vice-chancellors to take advantage of any opportunities that opened up as a result of Brexit. He pointed out that 90 per cent of the university community had voted for Remain, adding: 'While we deal with this sense of loss and disconnect, there's a risk that the opportunities presented by Brexit are overshadowed.' His university was the first in the UK to establish a campus in China. His argument has led to speculation that Nottingham and other universities might seek to expand their presence in Asia. If they do, they are likely to find a ready audience for their endeavours in the media and they should milk that.

A second issue for the media in future is the impact of the Government's decision to lift the cap on student numbers. It is true that most media outlets are keen to see whether this will lead to the weakest institutions going to the wall as the country's leading universities cream off more of the brightest students, but they will also focus upon universities' expansion plans. At present, it looks as though the policy has not had as major an impact as both pundits and politicians expected (rather like the effect the raising of tuition fees has had – or has not had, to be more precise – on student demand for places). However, some of the country's leading universities – Birmingham and UCL, for instance – have announced major expansion plans. Even Oxford's and Cambridge's decisions not to expand merited coverage as it led to a debate over whether elite institutions would remain elite if they grew larger. Of course, any expansion of student numbers has to take account of the size of the cohort of school leavers – down in recent years – which has ameliorated the effect of this policy. It is potentially still an interesting story for the media – especially over individual institutions' decisions to offer incentives to potential students (such as free laptops). Beware!

Conclusion

The vast army of public relations experts now employed in promoting universities have to adopt a different approach to the media these days. When I first started on the *Daily Mirror* in 1989, the *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* each had two education correspondents. The Sunday newspapers had dedicated education correspondents, too. The *Express*, the *Mirror* and *Today* (the now defunct Rupert Murdoch-owned newspaper) had one and the *Sun* had a reporter who dedicated a large percentage of his time to covering the subject. In addition, the *Independent* and the *Guardian* had substantial education supplements. The *Independent* does not have a dedicated education writer now it is just an online product, the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* only have one dedicated to the paper (although the *Telegraph* does now have one working online too). Go to an education conference and you will no longer find a representative from either the *Sun* or the *Express* covering it. At the *Mirror*, their education reporter combines coverage of the subject with reporting on transport and labour relations too. Those meaty education supplements have disappeared – with the *Guardian* now having dedicated pages devoted to the subject within the main paper and the *Independent* disappearing as a newspaper altogether. A bright spot on the horizon, though, is that the *i* – that offshoot of the *Independent* sold to a separate newspaper group – has appointed someone to cover education.

Public relations staff can no longer get by with just schmoozing the education correspondent. They have to tap up, say, the business and science correspondents, too. Business is a key area for universities to get their message across about the

importance of the higher education sector to the UK economy. It nets around £27 billion a year. Science research, of course, can also provide opportunities for some of the human interest stories I dealt with earlier. Researchers also have to grapple with dealing with the news reporting staff – some of whom may have little knowledge, and little interest in, education.

In spite of the contraction in the number of national newspaper education correspondents, there is more space devoted to the coverage of higher education. Partly, that stems from the fact that the percentage of young people going to university has substantially increased and so more parents and students want to read about it. It stems partly, too, from the fees students now have to pay and the debts they accrue. I said at the outset of this pamphlet that universities would have to consider whether they were getting bang for bucks in terms of what they were spending on media relations. In the same way, students want to see that they are getting bang for their bucks from the courses they take. In some ways, this means UK universities will face a more critical press in the years ahead. Complaints about courses with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator are rising; student satisfaction ratings – while still high – are falling. Individual universities may have to defend themselves from criticism on these scores and should be prepared with a plan to combat any rise in complaints or lowering in satisfaction ratings. The road ahead for media relations will not be easy for universities but the increased interest in higher education will mean that army of 600 or so university public relations officers will have to be on their toes.

A word, then, about how media relations officers should approach the press, TV and radio. The scattergun approach

is not a good idea. On too many occasions in the past I have been approached by press officers who have come up with a list of stories and features that I might be interested in, and put forward five ideas, say. Much better to have researched the kind of material the newspaper they are speaking to has been running and select one or maybe two suggestions tailor-made to fit that audience. With the contraction of the press, there is more pressure on journalists to produce and they do not have the time to run through a whole gamut of ideas.

Finally, I would counsel my colleagues in the press to listen to what people have to say. Some years ago, I was on a panel with fellow education journalists tackling this precise question about how to improve relations between the higher education sector and the media. One panellist offered the following advice: 'Don't call me – I'm far too busy to talk to anyone.' She also counselled against an invitation to go out to lunch. Wrong approach – and not just because of the turning down of a free lunch! I have always worked on the theory that you never ignore a telephone call or face-to-face approach – it may just have the front page lead that you are looking for (which may not be the original idea the caller was trying to promote). It emerges through conversation. That, I think, is the essence of media relations with the higher education sector (and others): dialogue not just the promotion of press releases.

The world of higher education, therefore, is likely to be faced by more space in the media being devoted to its issues – and less understanding and knowledge of the sector by those who are filling it. It is a challenging time for those paid to promote the image of their university. But, given the quality of British higher education, a far from impossible task.

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Richard Garner is the UK's longest-serving education correspondent and has worked at the *Times Educational Supplement*, the *Mirror* and the *Independent*.

In this HEPI Occasional Paper, he questions whether universities are making the most of their opportunities to work with the media.

Through a series of colourful anecdotes, he reveals what journalists really want to know and how higher education institutions can best work with them.

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