

Mixed Media: what universities need to know about journalists so they can get a better press

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With a Foreword by Professor Adam Tickell



About the author

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Contents

Foreword by Professor Adam Tickell	5
1. Introduction	7
2. Life under the microscope	11
3. Opportunity for all	23
4. The Oxbridge obsession	31
5. Conclusion	35

Foreword

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When the World at One, Radio 4's flagship lunchtime news programme, reached its 50th anniversary in 2015, they asked people from public life to nominate the very best aspects of the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, nominated science and universities in a short but evocative contribution that pointed to our international excellence across the sciences, social sciences and humanities, concluding that 'they have the ability to make life better and they are one of the fifty things that make our country so great'.

How things seem to have changed over such a short period. It can sometimes feel as if a broad political consensus around the value of both university research and a university education has completely vanished. I first met Rosemary Bennett when she was relatively fresh to the higher education beat on *The Times* and I remember her saying that she had expected to have time to visit universities and settle in but that the levels of interest were astonishing. In this reflective essay, she explains why this has not just been an overnight phenomenon but stems from a legitimate interest in public institutions, fuelled by the expansion of higher education and the introduction of higher fees by, of course, David Cameron's first Government.

It does sometimes feel like a relentless onslaught. While senior pay is a perennial, broader fissures in society also play out in the media through fast-moving stories about universities where the actions or beliefs of staff and students can become weapons in disagreements about culture, unease about

inequality, desires for social mobility and / or social justice and so on. Unsettlingly, Rosemary convincingly argues that rather than addressing our critics, too many university leaders have left the field, perhaps hoping the media will move on. Some have been thrown on the defensive, pointing out (as I have done myself in both the *Guardian* and at a Select Committee hearing) that speeches just are not being cancelled, rather than engaging in the broader criticisms around what a healthy campus environment should look like.

Speaking personally, I am sometimes quiet on such matters because I am acutely aware of the need to balance the broader interest in debate against the knowledge that my own university community is as deeply divided on some issues as is broader society and my neutrality can be healing. But the challenge, as this essay suggests, is that this approach is a bit easy.

As seats of learning, universities – and university leaders – cannot be neutral on integrity, on free speech within the law, on encouraging debate and challenge, on our place in contemporary life and so on. If we are, the risk is that we stop being seen as places where integrity resides, as places for debate in all of its messy forms and as the leaders we are in terms of our outstanding research and our excellent and sought-after education.

1. Introduction

In early 2017 Richard Garner, the late and much-missed doyenne of education journalism, authored a paper for HEPI on how universities can communicate better with the media. He correctly predicted that, despite the declining number of education correspondents, the number of news stories about universities would increase. I am not sure he expected quite the surge in coverage that we have seen in the last few years.

It has not been a wholly comfortable experience for the sector. Many of the stories have been unflattering and at times even damaging.

Richard was the longest serving UK education correspondent so was able to chart some of the longer-term trends in higher education and media relations. My background is different. I have covered a large number of different sectors from commodity brokers at the start of my career to banking, economics, politics and social affairs before moving to education in 2016. Rather than seeing the historic sweep of higher education coverage, I view it in relation to how other sectors are treated by the media, and what might be learnt from what happens there.

The first thing that struck me was the sheer scale of change the sector has been subjected to in a matter of a very few years. It has grown dramatically, obviously, fees have trebled and the student numbers cap has been removed. But in the last couple of years alone it has had to contend with, among other things, a brand-new regulator trying to make a mark, a myriad of new measurements, including graduate salaries and teaching quality, and two nationwide strikes over pensions and other

issues. The Office for Students has not only introduced a new registration system, but has gone in hard on social mobility, demanding far more robust Access and Participation Plans than ever before. Universities are required to offer far more comprehensive mental health services and better pastoral care. An overhaul of admissions, the end to predicted grades and post-qualification offers is next on the agenda and the sector awaits with interest details of the Government's desire to root out 'low-value courses'. All that comes amid Brexit and the COVID-19 crisis, the latter seeing political intervention intensify. Autonomy is being eroded.

Perennial change is the norm for many other sectors, including other parts of the education system. Schools are in permanent revolution as different secretaries of state come and go. The health service, local government and other parts of the public sector have grown used to managing constant flux. They are also used to being a political football, kicked around to make this point or that when problems with the party or voters loom. For universities, with their historical autonomy, it is newer and quite possibly unnerving.

Alongside this political focus is far greater media scrutiny. Leadership in universities is pretty much drawn exclusively from within the sector, so it is understandable if they feel somewhat besieged with the new deluge of stories about both the broader sector and individual universities. However, from my experience of covering other sectors, both public and private, it feels very familiar. It also feels like a permanent shift. The growth of the sector, the cost of fees and maintenance to students and their families and to the taxpayer mean not only the level of scrutiny has increased but the nature of stories

is different. They are consumer in nature these days, which means they are more emotive and not just about policy. That can make it more difficult to get your point across.

All of this may be pretty familiar to those in university communications departments. They have been on the front line during this time of rapidly expanding scrutiny, responding to escalating media interest on a daily basis. But I hope this paper provides some useful insights to others in higher education about how journalists and newsrooms operate, and why universities became front page news.

2. Life under the microscope

Talk to any vice-chancellor these days about how they feel universities are treated by the media and you are likely to get a gloomy response. To many, it seems they went from national treasures to the doghouse, and are now routinely castigated as overly commercial, greedy and more interested in institutional expansion than educating the next generation.

Many senior figures in higher education seem genuinely bewildered about why this has happened and fear the souring of a once agreeable relationship is permanent.

From the point of view of the newsroom, it does not look quite so sudden nor quite so terminal.

What has taken place in recent years is not media bashing or a vendetta but simply greater scrutiny that is a natural consequence of the growth of a sector whose annual operating expenditure is now close to £40 billion. Added to this are the far greater proportion of young people going to university and, perhaps most importantly, substantial tuition fees and student debts, which is where I start.

As the implications of the trebling of tuition fees to £9,000 became clear, and the average debts of students climbed to £50,000, universities were no longer just a policy story. They became a consumer story too, and an important consumer story among one of the most powerful groups in any newspaper or broadcast audience – parents. Young people may have shown themselves to be remarkably price insensitive when it comes to their degrees, but their parents are less so and these parents are newspapers' paying customers and

broadcasters' audiences. In the case of *The Times* many readers were graduates themselves, studying in the days when it was free or cheaper. Whether graduates or not, most wanted their children to get the best degree at the best university they could get into. However, the sums at stake were large and, as canny consumers, they wanted to know not just what their children's lifetime earnings would be or what profession they would get into, but what they were actually getting for their money in the three or four years they were on campus. Correspondence with readers about higher education – and there was plenty of it whether on the letters page, in comments under online stories, by email or on social media – would swiftly revert to a discussion of what precisely £27,000 (now £27,750) was for. HEPI was among those warning this explanation was becoming pressing.¹ In the media this led to readers wanting stories about admissions, why the number of firsts and 2:1s was rising and how much actual teaching was on offer.

Universities were fast becoming the ultimate consumer story. Consumer stories are a different style of reporting from policy stories. They are more emotional, use colour and powerful case studies. They are campaigning in tone, calling for action or redress. The rules of balance that apply to policy stories do not apply so rigorously here. Generally, the media is on the side of the consumer, the little person, and champions the cause. Universities, fairly or not, were the bad guys.

An apparent lack of openness aggravated the situation – not just from universities but from the Government too. Ministers were less than explicit about the means-tested nature of maintenance

1 Nick Hillman, Jim Dickinson, Alice Rubbra and Zach Klamann, *Where do student fees really go? Following the pound*, HEPI, 2018 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/11/22/student-fees-really-go-following-pound/>

loans. A regular feature of correspondence with readers was their shock when they discovered they were expected to pay almost £5,000 a year for rent and other costs under the scheme. It felt like a stealth tax. Some discovered this in the summer before their child went off to university, leaving them in a panic. Martin Lewis, the television presenter and personal finance expert, is particularly eloquent on the theme, painstakingly producing annual updates for parents in various income bands on what they are effectively required to pay.

Regarding universities, readers' questions were particularly pertinent when it came to the actual cost of teaching humanities and social science degrees, with their emphasis on individual learning and a low number of contact hours.

Everyone inside the sector knew there was heavy cross subsidisation between subjects, and that 'tuition fees' were misleadingly named since they covered the entire student experience and not just teaching time. But this argument was not powerfully made externally until very recently. The first time I remember hearing it was during the first recent University and College Union strike when a row blew up over tuition fee refunds.

A report titled *Class Size at University* cast a new light on this.² Researchers created a metric to measure 'intense' teaching time across subject and university and found Physics students receive on average 2.3 times more teaching time than History students and 2.9 times more than Economics students over the course of a standard three-year degree.

2 Gervas Huxley, Jennifer Mayo, Mike W. Peacey and Maddy Richardson, 'Class Size at University', *Fiscal Studies*, Vol 39, Issue 2, 2017 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1475-5890.2017.12149>

It made a small story but carried considerable resonance. Universities are charities, but the language of the market and value for money was beginning to take hold, so it was reasonable for readers to ask about the costs of inputs. Universities also used the language of the market. For example, one of the explanations for sharply rising senior-level pay was that vice-chancellors running multi-million-pound businesses needed equivalent remuneration to their private sector peers and therefore had to recruit in the global market where university leaders were even better paid.

The changing nature of university stories was illustrated most clearly in the 2018 lecturers' strike. Aside from the *Guardian* and *Mirror*, most mainstream media are pretty anti-strikes and have no particular sympathy with those withdrawing their labour. I assumed the coverage in *The Times* and elsewhere would be in this vein. I could not have been more wrong. The plight of students missing out on vital teaching in an important term, the risk to summer exams and finals became the focus of the story, not the rights and wrongs of the pensions dispute. It became pretty hard for employers to get a word in about the future of the pension fund, a shame given the bigger the deficit the less teaching time there may be in future.

Just as the media began to cover universities as consumer stories, a second change took place that added to yet more scrutiny.

The cost to the taxpayer of the rapidly expanding higher education sector was emerging, and the rules of how it would appear in the national accounts were about to change. The generous and progressive nature of the student loan system meant a large proportion of fees was never going to be repaid,

a situation made worse in 2017 when Theresa May announced the repayment threshold would rise from £21,000 to £25,000. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated 83 per cent of graduates will have all or some of their loans paid by the taxpayer.³ While initially this was to be kept off the books and treated as an asset until finally written off in 30-years' time, that changed in late 2018 with a stroke of the pen by the Office for National Statistics. Student loans went from assets to deficit with a portion classified as government expenditure. It equated to about £12 billion in that financial year.

In terms of media coverage, it meant more and more journalists piling in and writing about higher education – economics and political correspondents and columnists who take a keen interest in any issue that will have an impact on taxpayers and voters.

Taken together, the level of media scrutiny on universities ratcheted up. According to the Factiva media monitoring database there were 7,193 stories about universities in the leading 16 national daily and Sunday newspapers in 2020, up from 4,644 five years before.

It probably felt deeply unfair to universities, many of which felt under fire. However, the tone and content of the stories were really no different to what other sectors have been under for years. Every part of public and commercial life is scrutinised closely by the media. Every day, newspapers and broadcasters, local and national, carry stories about how public money is being spent, where favours are perceived to be done, poor

3 Chris Belfield, Jack Britton and Laura van der Erve, 'Higher Education finance reform: Raising the repayment threshold to £25,000 and freezing the fee cap at £9,250', *IFS Briefing note BN217*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2017 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/9964>

governance, questionable customer service, poor value for money and their long-time favourite, fat cat pay.

When senior university figures have discussed negative media coverage with me, I suggest they consider what it must be like running a local authority. There, the scrutiny has been so intense they are required to publish any expenditure over £500. Biscuits at meetings are a distant memory and there is a Town Hall Top Ten of the highest paid. NHS management, government departments, quangos, multi-academy trusts and private schools are all in the same boat. In 2020, the dismissal of a teacher at Eton over his online lecture on feminism ran in the newspapers for over a fortnight, at times on the front page.

Most parts of the private sector get similar treatment and even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media scrutiny does not stop. The awarding of PPE contracts was swiftly a subject of particular press interest, with some of the supplying company bosses given the full press treatment of pictures of their homes and holiday snaps from Facebook splashed all over online and print editions.

The media are a far harsher critic than any watchdog. Newspapers and broadcasters are quicker off the mark (they do not need lengthy inquiries) and less sympathetic to complex factors. They are energetic and forensic. Momentum builds when stories take off as readers, viewers and whistle-blowers, MPs and interest groups pitch in. It is often unfair and uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of it and becomes extremely difficult to get any other another point of view across.

Once the spotlight settled on higher education, journalists

found plenty to write about that their news desks loved. They were also spoilt for choice with brand new datasets such as the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes and the controversial Teaching Excellence Framework measuring graduate salaries and judging teaching quality respectively. There was a new regulator, the Office for Students, keen to make a mark. Vice-chancellor pay, unconditional offers and the fast-growing proportion of first-class degrees formed a trio that pushed more or less every news button.

In order to get education stories in contention with the news of the day, journalist pitches to time-pressed news desks have to be punchy, with complex debates or announcements boiled down into a few sentences. Stories about UK universities are competing with the top global news of the day. Early in the process of pitching in a story is consideration of what the headline would be, so consumer-style stories about higher education worked really well. Unconditional offers worked (free passes / pressure selling) grade inflation (prizes for all) and vice-chancellor salaries (fat cat pay). These three topics were often dismissed as 'secondary issues' by universities, and not something that needed any particular attention. That attitude served only to sharpen the appetite of education correspondents.

Of the three, fat cat pay is the perfect newspaper story and this one ran in every publication from the *Financial Times* to *The Sun*. It ticked every box. There was robust data, thanks to the *Times Higher Education* compiling it. It was familiar territory for journalists and has done the rounds from banking to NHS management to charities. There have been past media victories over the years in the area, leading to reforms and some measure of restraint.

Some of the salaries appeared hard to justify given the sector in question is education and the institutions were charities. It tapped into readers' sense of injustice over their children's mounting debts. It played to the 'ivory tower' trope, and revelations that vice-chancellors sat on the committees setting their own pay made them look out of touch with the modern world where such practices were long gone. It also had plenty of material required for the 'day-two follow-up' with glorious details of grace-and-favour homes and business-class travel.

Significantly, it had Government buy-in with Jo Johnson, the Universities Minister at the time, deeply uncomfortable about some of the salary packages. His successor, Sam Gyimah, was alarmed at the old-fashioned practices surrounding remuneration and apparent lack of accountability.

The story even had its own 'villain' – Dame Glynis Breakwell, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bath, the highest paid vice-chancellor for many years. There were 392 stories written about Dame Glynis' salary or making reference to her salary package between the spring of 2017 and the time of her retirement in February 2019.

The other factor that made it a long-running and high-profile story was the absence of push back. When no other side to the story was put repeatedly and with conviction, the media simply stepped it up.

Only Professor Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor at Oxford, was brave enough to take it on with her famous speech comparing vice-chancellors to top-flight footballers. Speaking at the *Times Higher Education's* World Academic Summit in September 2017, she blamed 'mendacious media and tawdry

politicians determined to do their utmost to damage one of the most successful sectors of the British economy' for the pay row. It may not have hit quite the right note but at least she had a go.

Mostly, the defence was that UK universities needed to be able to attract top global talent. That did not quite ring true when a quick look at appointments showed most universities recruit their vice-chancellors from other UK universities.⁴

Unsurprisingly, the majority of vice-chancellors ran for cover, and, as a result, were pretty much unavailable to talk about anything else going on in the sector.

Countering accusations of high pay is tough. In all the years I have covered pay rows in a range of different sectors, I can only think of one occasion where it has really worked. Sir Daniel Moynihan, Chief Executive of the Harris Federation and the highest paid academy trust chief executive on £450,000 a year, is a rare example of someone who rigorously defends his salary, using an estimate of the taxpayers' money that has been saved by Harris demonstrably improving failing schools.

I use the example of pay not to rub salt in wounds, but to show how easy it is for a story to take off when all the right ingredients are there. However, it also illustrates higher education is only getting the same scrutiny as everyone else. This is not a passing phase. It is how things will be from now on. The size of the sector, its trajectory of growth over the next decade, tuition fees, debts and vocal parents who are often responsible for student rent and maintenance, mean intense scrutiny is here to stay.

4 Rosemary Bennett, 'University merry-go-round blows hole in vice chancellor salary claim', *The Times*, 2 January 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/university-merry-go-round-blows-hole-in-vice-chancellor-salary-claim-7hb75j7lb>

It is also possible that the timing of Brexit did not help, although not in the way some university leaders think.

The higher education sector made clear that it believed leaving the EU risked damaging the attraction of UK universities to overseas students and top academics and rightly pointed out Brexit imperilled vital research funding and valuable programmes such as Erasmus. This did not in itself contribute to any souring of relations between the media and higher education.

It is certainly true that Brexit campaigners were concerned universities were not more even-handed in their assessment of the impact of Brexit, and failed to see that anything good could come of greater political independence. Many thought campuses had become Remain 'monocultures', unfriendly places for the small number of Brexit academics and students to air their views. They were probably right to be concerned. Even four years after the referendum, a poll from *YouGov* of 820 current and former academics found only about half of respondents said they would feel comfortable sitting with a colleague who is a Leave supporter at lunch, in a meeting or in the staff room.⁵

A few hardliners thought impressionable youngsters were being brainwashed into life-long Brexit hostility by their lecturers, but attempts to generate a media campaign against the sector swiftly fizzled out. One example is the short-lived attempt by one Brexit-supporting MP to build a case. Chris Heaton-Harris, MP for Daventry and a Government whip, wrote

5 Remi Adekoya, Eric Kaufmann and Thomas Simpson, *Academic freedom in the UK: Protecting viewpoint diversity*, Policy Exchange, 2020 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/academic-freedom-in-the-uk-2/>

to all the UK's universities asking them to declare what they were teaching students about Brexit and requesting a list of their tutors. Universities denounced the move as 'sinister'.

However, it is one thing Brexiteers growing hostile to universities, but quite another to think it had much impact on the media, even its Brexit cheerleaders. Just like the world of big business, the media knew very well higher education was staunchly pro-Remain. Universities are outward-looking and internationalist, relying on global collaboration and, to a growing degree, funding.

It was hardly news that the sector and its staff were energetically opposed to Brexit. The response in *The Times'* newsroom to Mr Heaton-Harris's letter was a rolling of the eyes, the move seen as a rather clumsy attempt to polish his Brexiteer credentials and show off to fellow hardliners. The news coverage over the next few days largely focussed on him being disowned by the Government, and the wide condemnation of his campaign by academics and opposition MPs. The Comment section in *The Times* accused him of treating students like idiots. The story ran for a few days then fizzled out, with an unlikely claim from the MP that he was gathering information for a book. It simply had no momentum.

The pro-Remain stance taken by the university sector may have influenced its relationship with the Government, but it had little bearing of its treatment by the media from everything I witnessed.

If Brexit played any role, it was perhaps that it preoccupied the sector and distracted senior figures from seeing that problems were building rather closer to home that required careful management.

There is one area where the relationship between media and universities is unchanged. Journalists of every hue rely heavily on academics and their research for a steady flow of stories. A typical week at any outlet will see stories from the deadly serious to the light and colourful coming from the full range of academic departments. Academics are normally happy to help too on numerous stories beyond their own latest published research, if they can, and many have long-standing and fruitful relationships with a host of journalists. Long may it continue.

3. Opportunity for all

The COVID-19 pandemic has given universities something of a fresh start in managing their public image.

If the public did not know it before, they must surely now be aware that universities are the places where intensive (and expensive) research takes place leading to dramatic breakthroughs that save lives. While in Germany it was scientists at a small company, BioNTech, who created the COVID-19 vaccine, in the UK it was at the University of Oxford. The last year has seen literally hundreds of academics from universities across the country and of every type opine on prime-time news on topics as diverse as viral mutations to aerosol transmission to risk-taking behaviour. Some have become household names. Often, they have disagreed and some of their projections may, in time, be shown to be inaccurate. Even so, it has given the public a useful insight into research and academic debate. The 2018 study for Universities UK by BritainThinks found members of the public rarely mentioned unprompted that research was one of the benefits of universities.⁶ It would be surprising if that had not changed as a result of the pandemic.

Universities have stayed open for their students. It has been far from ideal and in 2020 teaching shifted online with only a few weeks' notice and was at times rather haphazard. But final exams and assessments went ahead and degrees were awarded. There were a few tricky stories. A decision by most universities to offer a blend of online and face-to-face learning

6 Universities UK, *Public perceptions of UK universities*, prepared by BritainThinks, November 2018 https://britainthinks.com/pdfs/Britain-Thinks_Public-perceptions-of-UK-universities_Nov18.pdf

in the autumn was derailed by a leak at Cambridge that all lectures would be online for the full academic year. A plea from the sector to the Government for £2 billion in funding to make up for the predicted loss of overseas student fees in 2020/21 was turned down. But nothing really stuck and there was a slew of light-hearted stories about how some universities managed their virtual graduation ceremonies.

Later in the summer, universities worked with the Government, embroiled in the A-Level results crisis, to ensure as many young people as possible could continue with their education. In the autumn term, students were welcomed back and 'blended' online and face-to-face teaching went ahead. There were incidents of over-zealous COVID-19 restrictions, most famously the fencing erected outside halls at the University of Manchester, but none of these stories had traction.

At the beginning of 2021, the focus shifted to the issue of fees and rent in lockdown. Many universities have responded with full or partial rent refunds where students cannot or do not return to campus. Charging full fees for a depleted university experience during the pandemic is trickier to resolve, especially since there is little prospect of the Government helping out.

Providing this is handled with care, universities may have a fairer media wind, so how can they capitalise on it, alongside managing the permanent shift towards greater scrutiny?

I would advise them to join public life more fully.

I have rarely met a vice-chancellor or senior leader who is not engaging, highly articulate and thoughtful across a broad range of issues in education and beyond. They are

invariably successful academics who, by virtue of the job, are running multi-million-pound businesses. The University of Manchester's turnover is over £1 billion a year. University leaders preside over complex problems as diverse as vast construction projects and international partnerships to teenage mental health and sexual harassment. They are at the sharp end of the culture wars and the free speech debate. They are highly knowledgeable about central and regional government and their local communities. Yet how many vice-chancellors have taken part in BBC QuestionTime, Any Questions? or any mainstream national news panel programme where broad views are required? Broadcast producers are desperate for senior figures who are above the political party fray to appear. Of course, these appearances are challenging and carry risk. They require lengthy preparation. But they are a platform to raise the profile of the sector, an individual university and its leader and demonstrate that they are a vital part of the economy and wider society. When vice-chancellors have appeared on Radio 4's Today programme's 'university roadshows' they have invariably performed well. It is a good first step towards greater visibility and I hope they will be revived.

Social media is a mixed blessing and Twitter is not for everyone. Numerous academics are skilful users and have large followings. A growing number of senior administrative staff use it effectively, including Paul Greatrix, Registrar at the University of Nottingham and Mike Ratcliffe, Academic Registrar at Nottingham Trent University.

The digital revolution has also opened up comment sections of newspapers. The *Guardian* has *Opinion* and welcomes pieces

from professionals about their field of work. The *Telegraph* has a large online comment section and *The Times* has the daily *Red Box* newsletter, which carries four or so pieces from outside contributors. *Tortoise* is both a digital publishing platform and hosts numerous speaker events. *Times Radio* has a growing audience and has generous 20-minute-long interview slots. That is on top of the specialist educational media, such as *Wonkhe*, and think-tanks, such as HEPI. These are great platforms to set out longer, more nuanced arguments and are disseminated well beyond the higher education world and to a far wider audience thanks to Twitter.

I would particularly urge university leaders to join the broader education debate. The schools' conferences that journalists attend are full of presentations and debates on how to teach better, new ways of learning, how GCSEs and A-Levels should be reformed, pastoral care, the merits of work experience and all manner of things. Headteachers happily waded in on the full range of educational matters, including what is going on in universities, good and bad. Universities should return the favour.

I was heartened to see Sir David Eastwood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, and Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, jointly author an opinion piece in the autumn of 2020 calling for A-Level exams to be scrapped in 2021 so that the extra time could be spent on teaching and learning. It was one of the most thoughtful pieces to be published on this extremely difficult issue. Dame Minouche Shafik, Director of the LSE, was an impressive contributor on the issue of inter-generational fairness in Amol Rajan's *Rethink Fairness* series on BBC Radio 4 in January 2021.

However, the episode devoted to education and fairness had no contributor to set out what universities have done to increase fairness in the last decade and their plans for the future. Too often when there are general debates about education, universities are overlooked.

Some institutions, for example King's College London and the University of Exeter, are deeply immersed in the broader education with their Maths sixth-form colleges. But for everyone else too, opportunities abound for senior figures in higher education to pitch in. The growing scepticism about GCSEs and the future of exams could use some serious input from universities. A growing number of teachers believe pupils spending months cramming for nine or 10 subjects and over 20 separate papers is a poor use of learning time. I am sure vice-chancellors and admissions colleagues, along with teaching staff, have views on this. Do they believe GCSEs consolidate learning in the way supporters claim? Was scrapping course work wise? Universities operate a variety of testing methods from modules to final exams to dissertations, so have valuable expertise here. Schools would love to know how much value highly selective universities place on the number of GCSEs. Are seven qualifications as good as 10? What of pupils who do 12 subjects? Does it matter to universities?

The chronic underfunding of sixth-form education is another live issue where university voices need to be heard. Students arriving underprepared and with knowledge gaps due to the paucity of teaching – 15 hours a week for three A-Levels in most settings – must be a cause of concern. A new north / south divide in sixth-form education is starting to open up with a number of large selective sixth-form colleges in the

capital offering 23 hours a week tuition and tie-ups with the private sector and universities.

What have universities done to help 2020/21 first-year undergraduates catch up with their lost schooling due to the pandemic? What about the 2021/22 cohort, which will have had an even more disrupted education? What has worked and what has not in terms of remote learning? There is a lot universities can contribute to debates on catching-up and the future of online learning.

The culture wars are unpleasant and the free speech row rages on. Feelings run high on both sides and it is tricky territory. But universities are at the sharp end. They have had to balance the right to academic freedom and free speech with student demands for 'safe spaces' and particular speakers to be no-platformed on the grounds of offensive or hate speech. Many within the sector believe the political intervention on this issue is unnecessary and the media coverage verges on the hysterical. The majority of the stories concern hastily-cancelled speaker events and withdrawn academic appointments or research grants which feel to me like perfectly legitimate territory for the media to investigate. I understand why universities stay out of the more general debate about free speech and its limits but it means the field is left clear for the zealots on either side.

Universities UK and the various mission groups of course have their part to play, and help protect individual institutions from governments and regulators, which can at times be vindictive when, for example, publicly criticised. But speaking up on these issues of national importance and on behalf of the sector cannot be left only to these groups. The burden has to

be shared. Senior university staff need to be accessible, quick to respond and ready to go out and meet journalists, who will welcome the opportunity for an informal chat or interview.

Universities are ferociously competitive when it comes to admissions and funding, but often look tight knit when it comes to reform. To an outsider, it feels as though they worry that innovating and taking action individually is a bit disloyal to the pack.

But when a university is courageous enough to go out on their own it can have dramatic results, and fast. Take the University of Bristol and contextual offers. When these were first piloted, they were viewed as genuinely radical and much criticised in the media as social engineering. Middle-class parents spoke about being prepared to sue if their child's place was given to someone with lower grades simply because they were less well-off. Now contextual offers are applauded for their role in transforming the lives of thousands of young people and one of the few things that has really worked to improve access. How long would this innovation have taken if the sector had tried to move together?

It contrasts well with the painfully slow progress towards post-qualification offers. It has been pretty clear that offers made on the basis of predicted grades is unsustainable but it has taken literally years for universities to grasp this nettle, partly because they have had to move collectively. When, finally, in 2020 the sector agreed (or appears to have agreed) to change to a system of post-qualification offers, it was greeted with some scepticism.

4. The Oxbridge obsession

There are 165 universities in the UK but members of the public could be forgiven for thinking there are a fraction of that number if they rely on the media for their information.

Universities outside the Russell Group rightly complain they are overlooked with broadcasters and the press fixated by the 24 oldest and best-known institutions. I am afraid to say it is even worse than that. There are a handful of names and phrases that in the media world guarantee a story sails into the paper or onto the evening bulletins. One is 'Sir David Attenborough', but close behind come 'Oxford' and 'Cambridge'. Throw in 'middle-class', 'elite' or 'public-school educated' and a story is pretty much certain to secure a prominent slot.

Readers may claim they have little interest in these two ancient universities but the figures suggest otherwise. Stories on Oxford and Cambridge are among the most commented on, most shared and more read than any other education stories. (The media has metrics to worry about too.) It is hardly surprising. Oxford and Cambridge have near iconic status, unrivalled history and are steeped in romance thanks in part to Sir Isaac Newton, Evelyn Waugh and Inspector Morse. Despite the league tables showing degrees from Imperial and the LSE can lead to better-paid careers, there is still the perception that an Oxbridge degree is a passport into any profession and into public life in particular. No matter what the subject, a story about either university sails onto the news list. From decolonising the curriculum to goings on at dining clubs, there appears no end to the appetite. Even the impenetrable and unending wrangling at Christ Church between the Dean and the Board have generated considerable column inches

on the broadsheets, though I fear readers are none the wiser for it. However, among the most popular are those about admissions. Readers are genuinely interested in the radical programmes at both ancient universities to increase the number of disadvantaged students. They are also genuinely interested in anything that casts light on how to get in, which schools do best on admissions and how are they managing to pull it off.

Nothing is likely to change in terms of the media obsession with Oxbridge. However, the news is not all bad. As there is simply more interest in the higher education sector and more coverage of universities these days, there is more space to go around. In the last few years, I have written about Warwick, Durham, Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle, Nottingham Trent, St Mary's Twickenham, Bath, Worcester, Swansea, Oxford Brookes, Sussex, De Montfort and many others. Increasingly, there is less snobbery in newsrooms about new or small universities, and an appreciation that 'former polys' can be among the most innovative, serve their region well and do the heavy lifting on social mobility. No university is considered too new or too small to have an interesting view or change how it does things. Nottingham Trent was rewarded with favourable coverage when it overhauled its degree awards and granted fewer firsts to try and retain the value of top-class degrees. Chichester was one of the first universities to end unconditional offers when it saw the detrimental impact it was having on the A-Level results of those who received them. There is also considerable appetite for 'slice of campus life' colour stories, for example the University of Sussex's Dog Walking Society, the fastest growing student club.

Universities may have to work harder for their coverage, but they can make use of the greater interest in higher education and the greater amount of time and space devoted to the sector.

Conclusion

University stories have become a newsroom favourite and that is unlikely to change. In fact, media interest is only going to grow. The number of students heading into higher education is projected to rise sharply as demographics shift. Radical changes to admissions, an area of intense interest among readers and viewers, are in the offing. The Government's full response to the Augar review on post-18 education funding is pending and its actions on 'low-value courses' are awaited. More generally, politicians, taxpayers, parents and students are more interested than ever before to know what they are getting for their investment.

Scrutiny of higher education by the media has intensified and is now more in line with other parts of the public and private sector. However, media stories have become markedly more 'consumery' in style, with newspapers and broadcasters eager to report on the day-to-day experiences of students, good and bad. In this, student journalists are willing and able to assist local and national media, a task made easier by social media.

Universities ably promote their successes, but the successes they talk about most are in research. This has been particularly marked in the last 12 months with so much of the understanding on the COVID-19 pandemic, advances in treatments and the vaccine coming from universities. Of course, there is much to celebrate here, and these are exciting stories to write. But there needs to be a rebalancing. Educating the next generation is of just as much interest to journalists, their readers and viewers. Universities and the media should work together to ensure there are topical and newsworthy

stories about advances in teaching methods, new resources for undergraduates and campus life.

Debate on the future shape of education will become more intense as the world emerges from the pandemic. Already in the UK, discussion is underway about the role of exams and the nature of qualifications, online learning and catch-up. Universities need to be a part of this debate, not just academics speaking about their research in the field, but leaders and senior administrative officers on how they see things.

The more universities take part in wider debates, the more journalists will treat them as part of the education system and seek them out for contributions and comment. The same applies to public discourse beyond education. There are many demands on the time of vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and senior admissions staff, but there are a growing number who make themselves regularly available to speak to journalists and I hope that number grows.

There will be no shortage of space for higher education stories in the years ahead. I hope universities see this as an opportunity and not a threat.

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In this HEPI debate paper on the media and higher education, Rosemary Bennett provides a commentary on the interaction of the two sectors and proposes ideas on how universities might best engage with journalists to promote themselves and their research.

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.

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Debate Paper 26