The One Nation University: Spreading opportunity, reducing division and building community

Richard Brabner

hepi

Debate Paper 28

About the author

Richard Brabner is the Director of the UPP Foundation and ESG. The UPP Foundation is a registered charity that offers grants to universities, charities and other higher education bodies. It was established in 2016 and is funded by University Partnerships Programme (UPP), the leading provider of on campus student accommodation infrastructure and support services in the UK.

Richard joined UPP in 2015 to establish and run the charity. Under his leadership the Foundation has funded 34 pilot projects supporting disadvantaged students to succeed at university, and has led the Foundation's focus on the civic university agenda. Richard has recently incorporated ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) in to his role.

Prior to UPP, Richard was Head of Policy at the University of Hertfordshire, and before that worked for two Conservative MPs in the House of Commons. He studied History and Politics at the University of Essex, and holds an MRes in Public Policy and Management from Birkbeck, University of London.

While the report uses evidence and examples from the UPP Foundation, it is written in a personal capacity and is not the view of the UPP Foundation.

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

We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.

December 2021 978-1-908240-88-0

Higher Education Policy Institute
99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX
Tel: 01865 284450 www.hepi.ac.uk

Printed by BCQ, Buckingham
Typesetting: Steve Billington, www.jarmanassociates.co.uk

Acknowledgements

I would like to put on record my huge thanks to colleagues who gave their advice while I was writing the paper. They include: Alistair Jarvis, Professor Andy Westwood, Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Chris Millward, The Rt Hon. Chris Skidmore MP, Dr Diana Beech, Dinah Caine CBE, Professor Ellen Hazelkorn, Jane Robinson, Jim Dickinson, Professor John Goddard OBE, Jonathan Simons, Jon Wakeford, Kevin Richardson, Mark Leach, Professor Mary Stuart CBE, Nick King, Nick Timothy CBE, Rachel Wolf, Dr Scott Kelly and Professor Sir Steve Smith.

I would like to thank the team at HEPI – past and present – for their guidance and considerable patience. In particular Nick Hillman who has been a constant support throughout the project. And finally to the UPP Foundation Trustee Board for their encouragement and support to undertake this personal project.

It goes without saying that the paper represents my view and any mistakes are mine alone.

Contents

Executive summary	7
Introduction	13
Balancing place and choice: a fair market for the common good	19
The culture wars: overcoming division to be valued by all	35
Revitalising community: on and off campus	51
Conclusion	61
Endnotes	63

Executive summary

In recent years universities have faced questions about their purpose and whether they provide value for students, graduates and the wider public. At times the increasing division within society has spilled over into the debate about universities too.

Universities play a significant role in shaping our society and economy and have done for decades. Institutions that mould who we are as a people face scrutiny and challenge all the time so – to some extent – this period of scepticism is not surprising.

But this scepticism comes at a difficult time. Inflation is rapidly eating away at the money available for educating each student. Delays to the outcome of England's Augar review has made long-term strategic decision-making difficult. Universities are dealing with the fallout from COVID-19.

The core argument is that our sector's problems stem from a system which offers benefits to, and is valued more by, the professional classes over those from less advantaged backgrounds. This has led post-liberal critics – from left and right – to question our worth.

On the one hand, there has been an unprecedented growth in higher education access for school leavers, who have much greater freedom to choose where and what to study. Most graduates, even with an expanded sector, continue to benefit from their higher education experience. Employers increasingly demand graduates. Local communities have been regenerated off the back of an expanded sector. The whole nation benefits from a highly educated populace.

But on the other hand, while we have liberated the choice and freedoms of some students, it has been at the expense

of other people who are rooted in their local communities. Instead of being a bulwark against division the sector is both a victim of, and has actively participated in, polarising culture wars. The immersive student experience – underpinned by community on and off campus – is more important than ever, yet opportunities to participate are unequally spread.

My vision is built around the concept of One Nation. An idea based on the notion of spreading opportunity, reducing division and building community. This paper sets this out in three interlinking chapters, with a focus on practical and pragmatic solutions.

Chapter 1 sets out the case for a choice-based system, which empowers students to choose what and where to study. It also argues, however, that the way the market currently works has been at the expense of taxpayers and 'non-traditional' learners, who are restricted by place. It recommends reforms to the system to create a better balance between choice and place.

Chapter 2 looks at the culture wars. It finds that support for universities is weaker among older people, those who voted Leave and the working classes. It suggests a monoculture within the academy affects how universities cope with cultural clashes and free speech. It argues for better engagement with people who do not share the sector's dominant values.

Chapter 3 outlines the importance of participation in an immersive student experience, underpinned by community. Through the lens of loneliness and social capital it argues that community and belonging need to be strengthened, particularly among working-class students.

To create a One Nation University, the paper makes several recommendations.

Balancing place and choice: a fairer market

- To maintain a demand-led system and to prevent restrictions on student numbers, we should **move away from an uber-progressive system to one centred on fairness, which balances the needs of current students, future students, graduates and taxpayers**. This means increasing the amount graduates repay, while providing repayment holidays during periods when graduates face the greatest financial burden.
- To create a flexible tertiary sector which fits around the lives and choices of all learners there needs to be **a long-term bi-partisan commitment to implementing key recommendations from the Augar review**. In partnership, the Government and the higher education sector should look to create a **Birkbeck-style evening university in every region of the UK**. As part of their civic functions, some universities could set up a **small number of subject specialist free schools to protect the pipeline for vulnerable but valuable subjects, such as Modern Foreign Languages**.
- To support the civic role in levelling-up 'left behind places' – and protect universities and students from market fluctuations – **the Government should create a Director or Office for Higher Education and Place**. This would fund new provision and intervene in the market when institutions are negatively impacted by market forces beyond their control.

The Culture Wars: viewpoint diversity and overcoming polarisation

- When involved in cultural clashes, universities should **develop an ethical framework and create local Citizen Assemblies to work out how to respond to them**.

- To ensure better engagement with all in society, universities should develop programmes to get more people from working-class backgrounds to visit university campuses. Under the remit of the new Director for Fair Access and Participation, **the Office for Students (OfS) should fund a small pilot scheme looking at which approaches work best**. Citizen Assemblies could also be used to develop effective engagement with hard-to-reach communities.
- **Led by the higher education sector and with support from the Government, an organisation like the Heterodox Academy in the US, which supports viewpoint diversity and pluralism, should be established**. In addition to providing useful resources and tools, it could develop leadership training programmes and consultancy on recruitment and progression practices.

Revitalising community

- To transform social capital and student wellbeing, to revitalise local communities and to help bridge town-gown divides, **the Government should create an AmeriCorps-type Student Community Service Programme for England**. Students would volunteer 100 hours of service in their local communities over the course of an academic year for a paid honorarium, with disadvantaged students also receiving a student premium. The aim should be for **50,000 students to participate in this national scheme**.
- In order that all students – regardless of background or mode of study – benefit from the immersive community student experience, One Nation **universities should embed community service learning throughout their curricula**.

- Universities and students' unions should work together to develop **an access and participation agenda for extra-curricular activities**.

While the bulk of this report focuses on higher education in England, it is hoped many of the issues and policy implications discussed will be deemed relevant across all of the UK.

Introduction

The impact of globalisation, the rise of populism and the apparent failures of western governments since the turn of the millennium have heralded a period of change and uncertainty.

In the UK, much has been written about the end of the liberal era, with previous orthodoxies challenged by critics across the political spectrum. Notably there has been a shift among some centre-right policymakers, who are increasingly sceptical of both liberal markets and liberal cultural orthodoxies and are starting to outline post-liberal alternatives which rebalance policy away from individualism and freedom towards community and control.

What replaces the liberal era is unknown, but what we can be certain about is that we are living through 'in-between times', as described by Jonathan Grant in *The New Power University*.[1] The certainties of the past are no more. Liberal policymaking is not as entrenched as it once was.

All of this was in train well before COVID but, since the pandemic, the pace of change has been given rocket boosters. This period of flux is having a major impact on higher education, with the future of universities hotly contested. Critics see the expansion of universities as a manifestation of liberal over-reach. Scepticism towards the sector is higher today than it has been for decades.

In general terms, post-liberals challenge universities in two ways:

i. **The market challenge:** They believe the higher education system incentivises the wrong behaviour. They think there has been too much focus on expanding three-year degrees and too much growth of courses which provide little economic return. They link the expansion of higher

education with low productivity and claim that the expensive residential model transfers skills from towns to metropolitan cities.

ii. **The cultural challenge:** Universities have found themselves at the centre of a debate about identity and belonging. Many believe universities are not only dominated by liberal-left world views but are also increasingly intolerant of alternative perspectives.

The threat of shifting funding from universities, ongoing concerns around reimposing student number restrictions and / or minimum entry requirements and various interventions on cultural issues all suggest post-liberal narratives are powerful and are shaping the debate about the sector's future.

But is there a better way? An agenda that maintains the good things about the liberal system, but recognises and ameliorates its weaknesses? I believe there is and it is about adopting the One Nation University.

One Nation

Speaking in front of 9,000 supporters at the Albert Hall in 1924, Stanley Baldwin – like many politicians who followed him – co-opted Benjamin Disraeli's 1840s novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations* to frame an argument about healing division and supporting all parts of society:

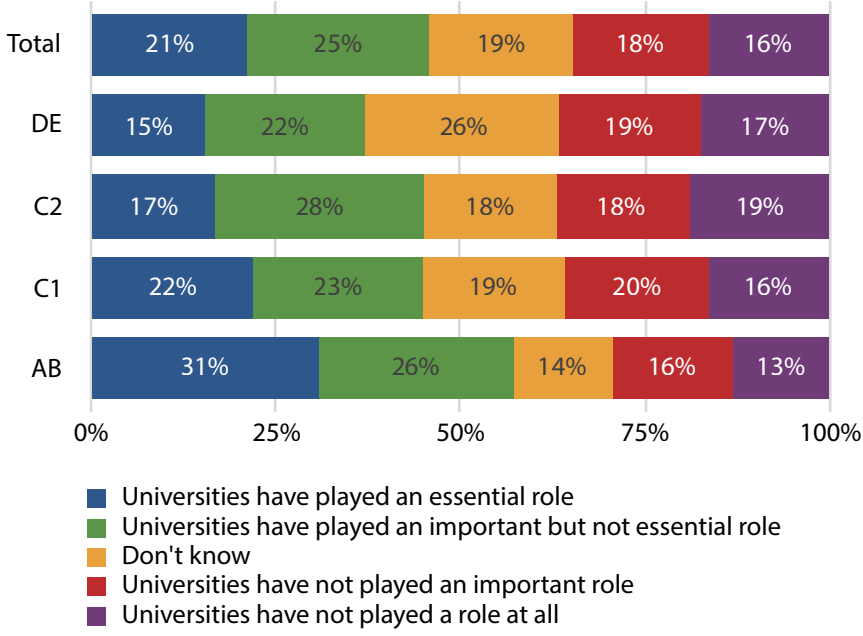
> *We stand for the union of those two nations of which Disraeli spoke two generations ago: union among our own people to make one nation of our own people at home which, if secured, nothing else matters in the world.*[2]

Given Disraeli and Baldwin were both Conservative Prime Ministers, One Nation is perceived as a Tory vision for society. But it has also been utilised by the Labour Party. Ed Miliband used the term 44 times in his 2012 conference speech.[3]

But what has this political vision got to do with universities and the in-between times we are living through? In my view, underlying the post-liberal critique of higher education are the class and partisan fault lines which run across our sector.

Recent polling for the UPP Foundation and HEPI sets out this challenge. On a range of questions about the value of institutions and degrees, support for universities is weaker among Leave and Conservative voters, older people and the working classes.[4]

In your view, what role have universities played in helping the UK address the Covid-19 pandemic?



This is one example from the UPP Foundation / HEPI, *Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey*, 2021, p.30. What is striking here, is that despite the positive work universities have done to support the UK address the pandemic, there is a divergence in opinion based on class.

Equally, as this paper will set out, whether it is access to university, experience at university or the opportunities after university, those from middle-class backgrounds tend to get a better deal than their working-class peers.

As Disraeli or Baldwin might say, we have a two nations university sector, with some parts of society much more likely to engage with and value universities than others. But while the post-liberal critique offers value in exposing our class and partisan weaknesses, some of their newly popular, radical and utilitarian ideas are misguided.

The two previous summer results cycles are a case in point. Despite years of criticism about standards, value for money, the way universities are run and whether they serve students and taxpayers, students have demanded access to higher education like never before. If restrictions on university places were reimposed, would demand suddenly shift to less popular forms of tertiary education? It seems unlikely. Instead, there could be thousands of lost learners.

This is just one example of the flaws in the post-liberal argument around higher education, which tends to be overly binary, lacking in nuance and divorced from the attitudes and behaviours of learners. Yet the purpose of this paper is not to go through the post-liberal criticisms and provide a rebuttal. Nor is it an argument for the status quo. Instead, it is an attempt to recognise some of the problems while offering an alternative – more balanced – vision for the future which maintain the sector's many strengths. In short, it is my attempt to bridge the gap between advocates of a post-liberal society, including within the ruling Conservative Party, and the higher education sector, which continues to do so much good.

The paper articulates a vision which rebalances the sector away from the 'Blameron' worldview of the last two decades,

to one which embraces community and understands the importance of place within the market system.[5] A vision which looks to reduce polarisation and limit damaging culture wars and promotes pluralism and civil disagreement. And a vision which supports all students to engage and participate in the life of the university so they flourish during and after their time in higher education.

In some respects, there are synergies to the civic university agenda the UPP Foundation has attempted to revitalise in recent years. The Civic University Commission, like this Debate Paper, was a response to the changing external environment. It put the issues of place and community firmly on the agenda.

But when running the Commission, I was struck by the common opinion that the higher education market and the civic university were not compatible. That is not a view I subscribe to. Instead, the renaissance of the civic university can help to rebalance policy towards place within the market.

This paper then is a little different. It is a personal values-based argument presented using various sources of secondary evidence, as well as informed by polling Public First conducted for the UPP Foundation and HEPI in February 2021. The paper is also shaped by my own experience of 15 years in and around the sector.

The paper has been drafted intermittently over the last year, and at the time of going to print there is uncertainty around the Government's response to Augar. By the publication date the response may have already happened.

The One Nation University takes a broader look at the future of the sector, so we decided not to rush publication. As a result, some of the recommendations linked to Augar may have a Tardis like quality to them.

One final point: the vision is far from comprehensive, given the complexity of higher education and all the challenges our sector faces. The recommendations – due to the nature of a HEPI Debate Paper – are ideas rather than fully developed proposals.

The paper focuses on what I believe should be the core priorities moving forward and offers a framework for positive change.

1. Balancing place and choice: a fair market for the common good

When reforming higher education, successive governments have looked to liberalise the system to extend freedom.

This has worked for many. We have seen, for example, the steady growth of school leavers entering higher education. Yet this change is lamented by the post-liberal critics. They believe too many young people go to university, entering with low entry qualifications and exiting with degrees that provide poor economic returns.

The post-liberals argue that government should steer more people to undertake technical or vocational courses at Levels 4 and 5. The assumption – sometimes made directly, sometimes implied – is that students are misled or taken advantage of by universities which benefit from the status quo.

The post-liberals are right to critique the way the market is currently working. It has left some students and universities behind: typically people who want or need to study locally and flexibly.

However, before exploring how the market needs to be reformed, this chapter outlines the value of maintaining student choice. It concludes with ideas for creating a One Nation system – a market which balances issues of place and choice, and puts fairness between students, future students, graduates and taxpayers at its heart.

The value of a choice-based system

Meet Saul and Lucy; two mature students at the University of Chichester. Saul was thrown out of home at 14, and subsequently led a life of crime and addiction. Lucy had been in and out of homelessness since she was 16.

Saul and Lucy struggled at school and gained few qualifications. However, following an extensive support programme from homeless shelter Stonepillow, they were encouraged to enrol on the University of Chichester's access to higher education bridging module.

This is a 12-week course for local students who have suffered homelessness. It helps them prepare for a university education. Lucy and Saul thrived during the course. Today, Saul is taking a degree in Adventure Education and Lucy is studying Fine Art.[6]

Despite the challenges of the pandemic and the difficult lives they have lived to date, their love of subject – this intrinsic motivation – has meant they are both doing well and expect to graduate.

Of course, it is fundamentally important that their overall higher education experience improves their confidence, resilience and skills. But does anyone think steering them towards a subject or course favoured by policymakers – which does not interest them – would result in better outcomes for them or society as a whole?

A key reason why Saul and Lucy are right to follow what interests them and why it is right to have an open system which allows them to do so, is uncertainty.

Choices on where and what to study are made within the context of unknowable futures. It is simply not possible for applicants to understand the full consequences of the choices they make, given the unknowns around the future of work, the possibility of having multiple careers and someone's ever-changing personal circumstances over time. But while it is

not possible for any student to grasp the full consequences of the choices they make, how can a policymaker possibly understand what course is better? Unlike the student, the mandarin has no understanding of the context of a student's life and no appreciation of their ambition.

In their book *Radical Uncertainty*, John Kay and Mervyn King set out the arguments for government, businesses and individuals to adopt strategies that are robust to alternative futures and resilient to unpredictable events.[7]

Within the context Kay and King set out it is entirely rational for students to base decisions – not on projected salary returns – but on giving them greater flexibility and options as their lives develop and the labour market evolves.

For example, we know that automation will have profound implications on employment, but we are much less certain on the extent and shape of this disruption. A university education may not always provide a direct route in employment (although there are plenty of courses which do) but the graduate attributes they acquire should provide resilience in an uncertain future.

While we cannot foresee the future, it is interesting to note that graduates tend to be more resilient in the jobs market. A study by London Economics found that Arts, Humanities and Social Science graduates bounced back faster from redundancy than those with just A-Levels.[8] Research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies showed that by the third quarter of 2020, when compared with pre-pandemic levels, 'there had been a 7% reduction in the number of graduates doing any hours of paid work in a given week, but a 17% reduction in the number of non-graduates doing any hours of paid work'.[9]

This evidence – and the example of Saul and Lucy – are powerful reminders of why individual choice matters.

The problems with the market system

While the system should continue to be led by the choices students make, this paper is not an argument for the status quo. There are key flaws which relate to a form of liberal dogmatism around both the function of markets and how progressive it should be.

Costs to the taxpayer

There is a significant problem with the costs of the system and how this relates to levelling up further education. In 2017, a few months after the General Election, the Government changed the student loans repayment rate from £21,000 to £25,000 (which has been further increased to £27,295).

This move was widely welcomed by the liberal policymaking commentariat, as those on lower incomes would end up paying less. Martin Lewis's website hailed it as a victory for graduates.[10]

However, this move led the RAB charge – the projected proportion of loans not paid back – to grow substantially. From 31 per cent before the change was made, the RAB is now projected to be well over 50 per cent – with only around 12 per cent of students expected to pay their loan in full.[11] The projected costs have substantially increased on taxpayers.

Looking ahead, as the country recovers from the pandemic and tackles other longer-term challenges such as ageing, climate change and security, there will be numerous demands on the public purse. But most relevant of all is the Government's ambition to develop a flexible Lifelong Loan Entitlement for people who want to study higher technical qualifications. This

was a key recommendation from the Augar review, with the aim of stimulating more demand for qualifications at Levels 4 and 5.

As the Government develops a loans system for people in further education – which will carry its own RAB charge – can they really afford such high write-offs on higher education student loans?

Given the collective financial challenges, it is difficult to see how an open choice-based system can be maintained when so much is not paid back. Something must give.

The market's blind spot: place

The second set of problems with the market relates to place. In *Remaking One Nation*, Theresa May's former Chief of Staff, Nick Timothy, provides a timely reminder that an individual's freedom is not set in isolation. It impacts others. It therefore requires government to balance out our freedoms to act.[12]

His view that successive governments failed to intervene to balance out competing freedoms rings true for higher education and the wider tertiary system. The funding regime and the removal of the student number cap has increased the freedom and choice of the 18-year old mobile student but has constrained the freedom and choice of less mobile students who typically need to attend their local institution.

This manifests itself in three overlapping ways:

i. the failure of the system to respond to the needs of non-traditional higher education learners;

ii. the market's impact on subject availability and choice; and

iii. the impact on institutions in terms of the hierarchy of the system.

Non-traditional higher education learners

The market has incentivised institutions to focus on easier-to-recruit school leavers. But without equal incentive to develop education which fits around the lives of non-traditional learners, it has left others behind.

Professor Geoff Layer, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton, made this point in a HEPI publication back in 2015:

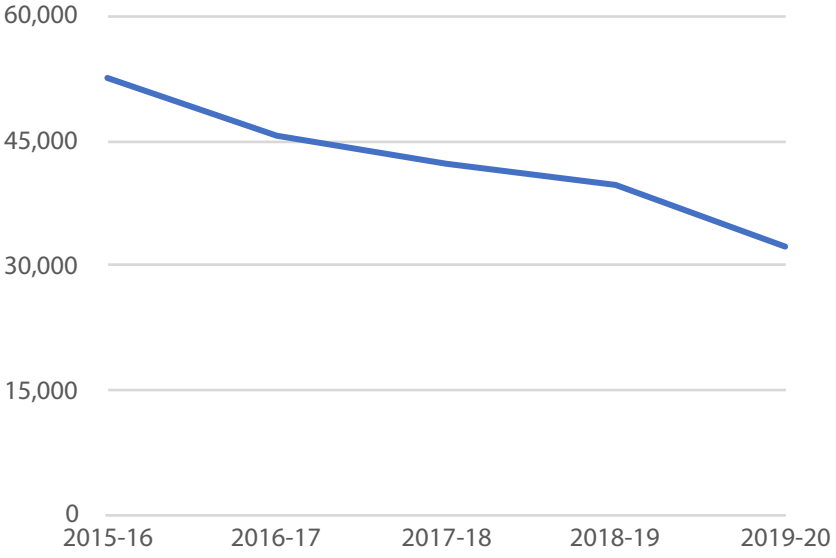
> *We have failed to take these people and their desire to progress and acquire new skills and knowledge into account in our rush to increase the number of easier-to-teach, easier-to-manage, income-stable and more homogenous full-time students.*[13]

Student numbers illustrate his point. While there has been a significant growth in the number of 20-year olds and under studying full-time, the numbers of other types of learners have either remained comparatively low or even declined.

The UPP Foundation's Civic University Commission showed in 2018 a rapid decline in adult education in universities, part driven by a 42 per cent decline in the number of students aged 30 and over on non-degree higher education courses between 2012/13 and 2016/17.[14] Since then, overall numbers have stabilised, but adults on non-degree higher education courses continue to fall significantly.

Other groups have also been left behind: white working-class boys are significantly under-represented compared to other groups in society. Only 13 per cent of Care Leavers and 11 per cent of Children in Need progress to higher education by the age of 19.[15]

First-year entrants aged 30 and over on 'other undergraduate courses', 2015/16 to 2019/20



Source: HESA https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#characteristics

At the heart of this problem are the incentives in the system. When an institution can fill their student places through the traditional route and is not supported to innovate to attract other students, why would they invest in riskier alternative modes of learning? Why would they get into internal battles to put on programmes in the evenings and weekends? And why would they prioritise partnerships with competitor institutions, like a local further education college, to develop a model where students start their course in college and later on progress to university?

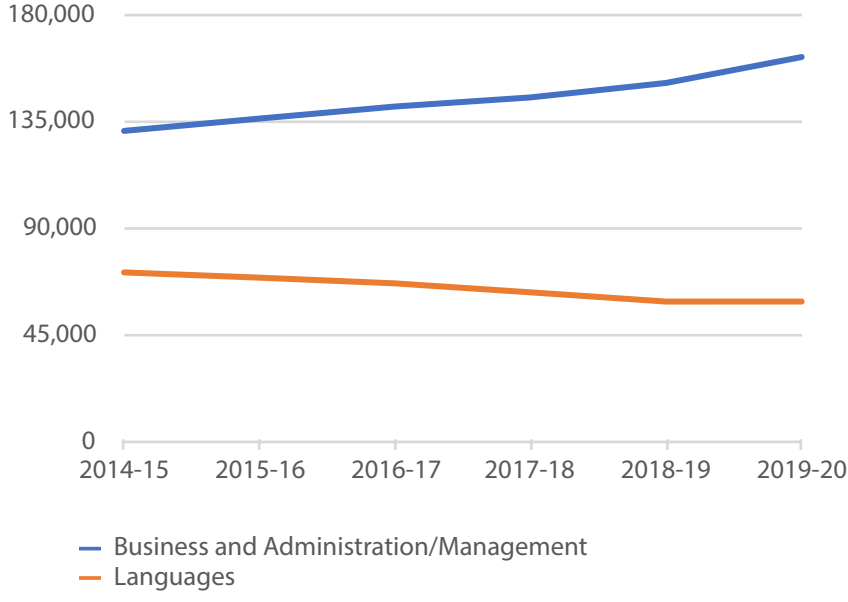
With the anticipated demographic increase over the next decade, there will be even fewer incentives to innovate unless policy is changed.[16]

Subject choice

The second concern about the system's impact on place relates to subject choice. As the Office for Students wrote recently, 'Local students who study in the same region as their domicile tend to concentrate in certain subject areas more'. They continued: 'This may be because they prefer these subject areas or it may indicate they have less choices available to them'.[17]

While causation is tricky to untangle, it is not unreasonable to be concerned about the market's particular impact on subject choice for students who want or need to study locally.

English undergraduate student enrolments



Source: HESA

As an example, if you are a student who wants to take a Business course, you are well catered for. The market has responded to demand by increasing the number of English-domiciled undergraduates on Business courses by 24 per cent since 2014/15. But if you want to take a Languages course, opportunities are becoming more difficult. There has been a 17 per cent drop in English-domiciled students on undergraduate Languages courses since 2014/15.[18] This is perhaps the biggest reason why seven universities dropped Modern Foreign Languages in 2019, with only 62 universities now offering the degree.[19]

This trend has the potential to impact negatively students whose subject choices go against the grain of popularity – particularly if they need to study locally and there is no local provision.

A related issue is looking at the challenges universities faced in supplying certain subjects. According to the Russell Group, laboratory-based subjects such as Chemistry, Physics and Engineering report average annual deficits of £1,769 per student.[20] As a result, other subject areas cross-subsidise higher-cost subjects, providing universities with a financial incentive to recruit large numbers of students in classroom-based courses to plug funding gaps.

The need to recognise higher education's broader value to place and protect so-called weaker universities

The demographic increase in young people over the coming decade offers a sustainable opportunity to spread the civic and educational – the individual and social – benefits of higher education institutions to 'left behind' places as part of the levelling up agenda. But this anticipated growth may not entirely mitigate challenges caused by market fluctuations.

So the third concern about place relates to the role of government in utilising universities to level up, and protecting institutions negatively impacted by market fluctuations to support student choice.

No system can completely inoculate itself from the threat of institutional failure but by allowing some universities to expand at the expense of others, the risk of institutional failure grows.

So far at least university closure has not occurred. But this is not a hypothetical issue. The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned in 2020 that there were 13 universities vulnerable to closure, who had 'already entered the [COVID-19] crisis in poor financial shape'.[21]

The problem is not so much the actual increase in risk, which is a natural feature of a demand-led system. The problem arises if the central arbiter fails to ameliorate or mitigate the increased risk.

As the Conservative author David Skelton writes in his book *Little Platoons*, pro-market approaches have at times morphed into ideological dogma.[22] This was evident when Michael Barber compared bailing out universities with supporting banks, as if they are somehow synonymous institutions.[23]

This paper does not argue for protection against poor financial management and leadership. But institutional closure, particularly in an area with little alternative higher education provision, would be catastrophic for local communities and student choice.

We should recognise that universities face advantages and disadvantages based on history and prestige. Some institutions often struggle because of the hierarchy in the system, rather than decisions they have made themselves. And reputational disadvantage does not necessarily reflect the value an institution offers to society.

Recommendations: Balancing choice and place – a One Nation University system

This chapter has argued for maintaining a demand-led system, while finding a better balance between the freedoms and interests of different groups of students, taxpayers and institutions.

To move towards a One Nation system, the paper makes several recommendations within three broad principles:

i. fairness;

ii. flexibility; and

iii. active government.

Fairness at the heart of the system

Research in 2015 by YouGov looked at the values of voters across all social groups. Fairness came second only to family as the most important value to the British public across all social classes.[24]

For higher education the importance of fairness was only too apparent during the u-turn over the way A-Level and BTEC grades were awarded in 2020. If a policy is not perceived as fair by the public, it will struggle to last.

Instead of governments and policymakers obsessing over how ultra-progressive the funding system is, they should obsess about how fair it is to all in society.

The Government has already started to tackle the fairness issue with the development of a Lifelong Loan Entitlement, so that the same level of investment is made to those who want to take technical qualifications at Levels 4 and 5. However, the additional costs, combined with the wider demands on the state means the Government needs to tackle the projected

costs of student loans. Otherwise, the system will not be fair to taxpayers.

Ultimately the current and future governments will have a choice between keeping an uber-progressive repayment system or maintaining a demand-led approach (by the time of publication this choice may have been made).

If a government chooses the former, access and choice will be restricted. This would be unfair to future students and is likely to impact those from widening participation backgrounds the most, as any comparison between the Scottish and English systems would suggest.

As a result, this paper recommends changing the repayment system so the RAB charge goes back to being around 30 per cent, in line with the original intentions of the 2012 system.

This can be achieved in several ways – higher repayments, a lower repayment threshold or extending repayments beyond the current 30-year cut off. The Government should test through market research what taxpayers, students and graduates consider the fairest way to increase the graduate contribution. The principle of fairness may also cause the Government to conclude that it should not be imposed retrospectively.

Inevitably this will lead to pinch points for graduates. The Government should explore the option of interest-free repayment holidays (perhaps up to maximum of two or three years combined) for graduates facing cost pressures (for example when they are buying their first home and / or have young children in childcare). This may require the Government to tinker with repayment terms for students who take up this offer, to ensure write offs are not substantially increased.

A One Nation system understands that what matters is how policies collectively interact to form an effective, sustainable and fair system. It is a progressive paradox: by making the system a little less progressive you can sustain a system which is highly progressive overall.

A flexible tertiary sector

As the paper argues, the system incentivises universities to focus on easier-to-recruit school leavers but has not provided equally strong incentives to develop education which fits around the lives of all learners. There are also faulty incentives around the supply of courses that are strategically important and / or expensive to put on.

Given the various reports about adult education, lifelong-learning and flexible provision over the last decade, the issues are well known. What we need instead is a focus on implementation.

During his 2020 Ditchley Annual Lecture 'The privilege of public service' Michael Gove said there is 'a tendency in Government to applaud the gracefully performative and overlook the boringly transformative'.[25]

The tertiary system is a classic example. While implementing a flexible system would be beneficial to many it is hard, would take a long time and the sitting government would not necessarily benefit, as it takes several years to be embedded.

Therefore, what we need is **a bi-partisan commitment to prioritising the long-term implementation of key recommendations from the Augar review**, which will enable a flexible system to flourish.

There were legitimate concerns with the tone of the Augar report and the communications around it - pitching higher education and further education against one another. A 'One

Nation' approach to tertiary education would be based on collaboration between HE and FE. Nevertheless, many of the recommendations from Augar would be extremely welcome.

In addition to the Lifelong Loan Entitlement this includes scrapping the Equivalent and Lower Qualification (ELQ) rules for those taking out loans at Levels 4, 5 and 6, better maintenance support and continuing to build up the teaching grant for higher-cost subjects.

Beyond the funding support for high cost and vulnerable subjects, **universities could support the sustainability for certain important disciplines by establishing specialist schools**. While the experience of universities setting up schools is generally mixed, there are good examples of specialist subject schools like the Mathematics sixth forms set up by Exeter and King's. As part of their civic responsibilities, some universities could establish Modern Foreign Languages schools for talented A-Level students who wish to study several languages. These would be small in number and highly specialist, so would not conflict with the work universities do in other local schools to raise attainment and aspiration. Given their unique nature they would only be viable for some universities to develop, for example in large urban areas accessible to young people across a wide region.

There is one further area the Government, in partnership with universities, should explore to transform the landscape of higher education in this country.

People from London and the wider Home Counties benefit from having a multi-disciplinary face-to-face evening university within commuting distance from their homes (Birkbeck, University of London). While there is of course some flexibility within existing universities outside London, and welcome innovations elsewhere, there is no real equivalent.

This is a major gap in the adult higher education landscape, which connects directly with the levelling up agenda. The Government – in partnership with the sector – should develop a feasibility study around establishing additional provision in the evening and weekends for working adults in England. **The aim should be to create a Birkbeck style multi-disciplinary university in every region.**

Active government in support of place and the civic role

A student demand-led system inevitably increases risk and some universities are negatively impacted by market forces outside of their control, due to an ingrained hierarchy within the system.

Problems emerge however when this intersects with governments – of all political persuasions – who have been 'territorially agnostic for many years'.[26]

There are positive signs that this is changing. Levelling up is the key policy goal for the current Government and Ministers have even started to talk about the role of new higher education institutions to develop so called left-behind places.

But action needs to match the rhetoric if we are to recognise universities as anchor institutions, and utilise them to meet the levelling up challenge.

Currently the regulatory and funding system does not truly account for the impact of higher education institutions on place and society. This is a gap which needs to be filled.

The Director (or Office) for Higher Education and Place, would have a role to evaluate and report to Government and Parliament on the holistic role of higher education and its financial health, with a particular geographic lens. It could also be a catalyst for funding – with grants and / or government backed loans – to extend higher education provision to left-behind places / higher education cold spots. And it would

provide a safety net for institutions negatively impacted by market forces outside of their control, establishing a role in supporting the restructuring of those institutions towards a sustainable future. There are some similarities here with the role of the Further Education Commissioner but, given the level of university autonomy, their powers would be limited, and any intervention would be based on mutual agreement and cooperation.

Broadly there are two options for implementing this change. The first would be to create a new body to carry out this function. This would need to work across the architecture of government (bodies such as the Office for Students, UK Research and Innovation, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency), as well as the three government departments involved (the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education). Like the Social Mobility Commission, it could come under the remit of the Cabinet Office. Alternatively, Place could be added to the general duties for the Office for Students, so this would have to be considered in all its decisions and a Director of Place recruited to carry out the function described. The Government may also want to consider changes to the secondary legislation governing Access and Participation Plans so they refer to work on access and participation in specific places, particularly with schools, community groups and employers.

2. The culture wars: overcoming division to be valued by all

We start this chapter with a cautionary tale from the United States. In 2010, there was a small seven percentage point difference between supporters of the Democrats (65 per cent) and Republicans (58 per cent) on whether universities have a 'positive effect on the way things are going in the country'. Nine years later, the gap had grown to 34 points (Democrats, 67 per cent; Republicans, 33 per cent).[27]

When the UPP Foundation and HEPI replicated this polling in England in early 2021, we also found some partisan divides. Leave voters are 18 per cent less positive towards universities than Remainers and there is a smaller but noticeable eight percentage points gap between Conservative and Labour voters.

However, unlike in the US, while Conservatives and Leavers were around twice as likely to express negative views about universities than Labour and Remain voters, the underlying feeling towards universities is neutrality.

The polling results are a blessing – England is nowhere near as divided as the US – but also a warning. In just a decade, the US has seen a growing split in views about universities, from a similar baseline to where opinion in England is now. Could we fall into the same trap?

England is not the US, and there is plenty of evidence and research to show division in our society is not as stark. Elements of the Republican Party – as shown by the response to the violent protest in Washington DC in January 2021 – has failed to respect very basic democratic norms, which is surely one of the causes of polarisation in the United States.

	Total	Leave	Remain	Conservative 2019	Labour 2019	US Total	US Republican	US Democrat
Total Positive	43%	35%	53%	41%	49%	60%	33%	67%
Neutral (incl. DKs)	46%	50%	40%	44%	44%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total Negative	11%	16%	7%	15%	7%	26%	59%	18%
Positive as proportion	**79%**	**69%**	**88%**	**73%**	**87%**	**70%**	**36%**	**79%**
Negative as proportion	**21%**	**31%**	**12%**	**27%**	**13%**	**30%**	**64%**	**21%**

Source: UPP Foundation / HEPI, *Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey*, 2021

But in recent years, universities have been regularly criticised by post-liberals for what we can broadly describe as cultural issues. At the heart of this is the perception universities are at the centre of a debate about identity and belonging, which tends to pit those who work and study in universities against those with more conservative values. The specific criticisms vary but they tend to centre around free speech, a perceived lack of thought diversity and intolerance.

Polling reveals gaps in support for universities based on education, age, class and voting intention. Yet a One Nation university has a mission to be valued by all in society, regardless of someone's political belief or background. Therefore, the paper turns to what can be loosely described as the culture wars. It untangles what the sector can do to reduce cultural

conflict, protect free speech and civil disagreement and better engage with communities who may not share its orthodoxies.

The monoculture

When it comes to the debate about culture wars, the first feature to recognise is a monoculture within the academy. A reasonable assessment suggests universities are dominated by (in general terms) left-of-centre values and opinions.

For example, various studies from the US, Europe and UK conclude that academics are more to the left than the general population.[28] Polls show academics are much more likely to support left-wing parties in the UK (albeit via self-selecting surveys).[29] HEPI has run regular surveys with YouthSight, which show support for centre-left parties to be much higher among students than in the population at large.[30]

That is not to say the academy has overly homogenous views (after all there is plenty of debate within left-of-centre opinions). And none of this should be surprising given the educational profile of academics and students. Nor is it a trait limited to higher education professionals.[31]

But it is important to recognise this feature of academic life for three reasons:

i. It affects how universities deal with flashpoints on campus.

ii. It affects how universities engage with wider society.

iii. It affects how those with minority opinions are treated.

Campus culture wars

A recent report from More in Common outlined the nature of the culture wars and why they are a problem for institutions like universities:

> *Culture wars debates consume a small minority of highly-engaged partisans, who ignite and feed the flames of conflict. But their effects are not contained to the small numbers who are engaged with them … They polarise societies, perpetuate conflict, reduce social trust, and distract the focus, time and resources of leaders across all sectors of society.*[32]

There are two features of the campus culture wars it is important to mention. The first, as noted by the centre-left writer Helen Lewis in *The Atlantic*, is that culture warriors on either side are heavily influenced by the debate in America, even if it is not relevant to the experiences of people in the UK.[33] The increasingly online and borderless nature of discourse has resulted in our public conversation being shaped by the country which is culturally dominant. Universities which clumsily respond to activists who take cultural cues from the US can come across as divorced from reality.

The second is that the culture war engages elites more than the public. In the recent UPP Foundation / HEPI polling, those from the wealthier AB socio-economic group were more likely to express an opinion on questions about cultural issues (free speech and 'decolonising the curriculum') than those from less well-off socio-economic groups.

However, given the socio-economic profile of academics and students, it should not be a great surprise that universities are often pulled into these conflicts. It is also why cultural conflict is unlikely to disappear with a change of government.

What should concern universities is how they respond to cultural flashpoints, as the prevailing monoculture can dangerously pull universities in one direction.

Universities should neither prioritise the views of cultural activists on campus, nor over-compensate by only

concentrating on the 11 per cent who are negative about universities. But they should attempt to find a common ground which best emphasises the sector's value to all, even if at times this disappoints highly-partisan cultural activists on campus.

Engaging with others

Linked to the way universities deal with cultural flashpoints is how they actively engage people and communities who have less prior connection with the sector.

Throughout the polling, via a segmentation analysis of different opinion groups and looking at the standard crossbreaks, we found people with more negative or neutral views about universities tend to have had less contact with them. Around one-third of people (34 per cent) have never visited a university, including a majority (53 per cent) of those from more disadvantaged (DE) socio-economic groups and a further 32 per cent of people have not visited a university in the past five years.

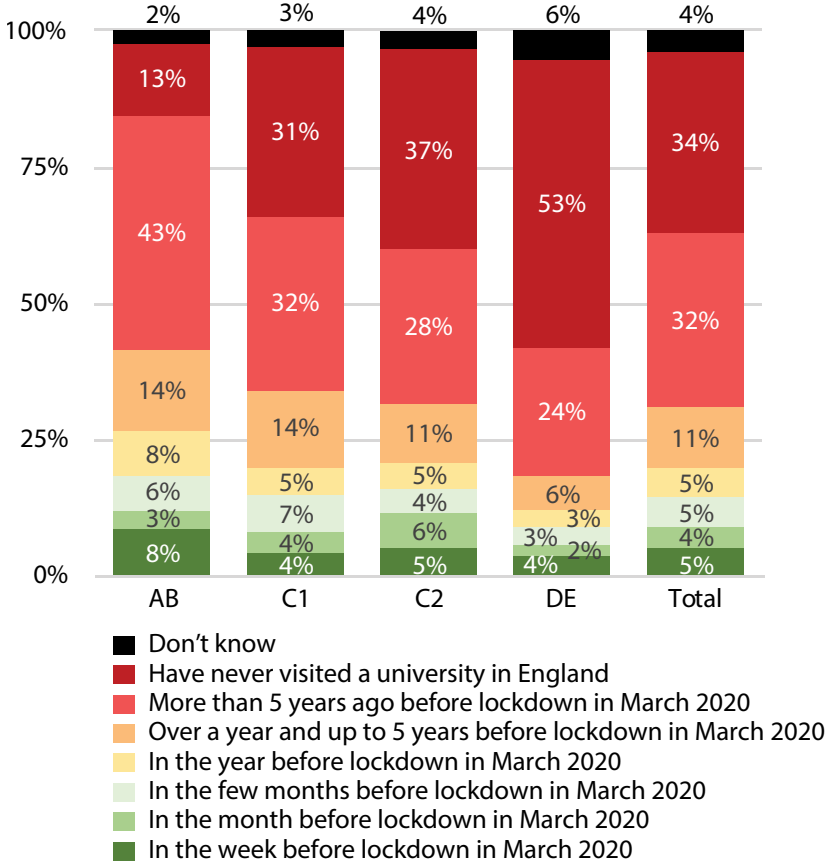
In other words, in the five years leading up to the pandemic, 66 per cent of the public had not set foot in a university, which rises to 77 per cent of those from the DE social class background.

We also found people from the more privileged AB social grouping – who themselves did not attend university – are more likely to have visited one. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of those in the DE socio-economic group who have never studied at a university have also never visited one – compared to 51 per cent in both C1 and C2 socio-economic groups and 37 per cent in the wealthier AB socio-economic group.[34]

It is also interesting to note that graduates report more homogeneity in the educational background of their friends than non-graduates. They are much more likely to say they would prefer their long-term partner to have a similar

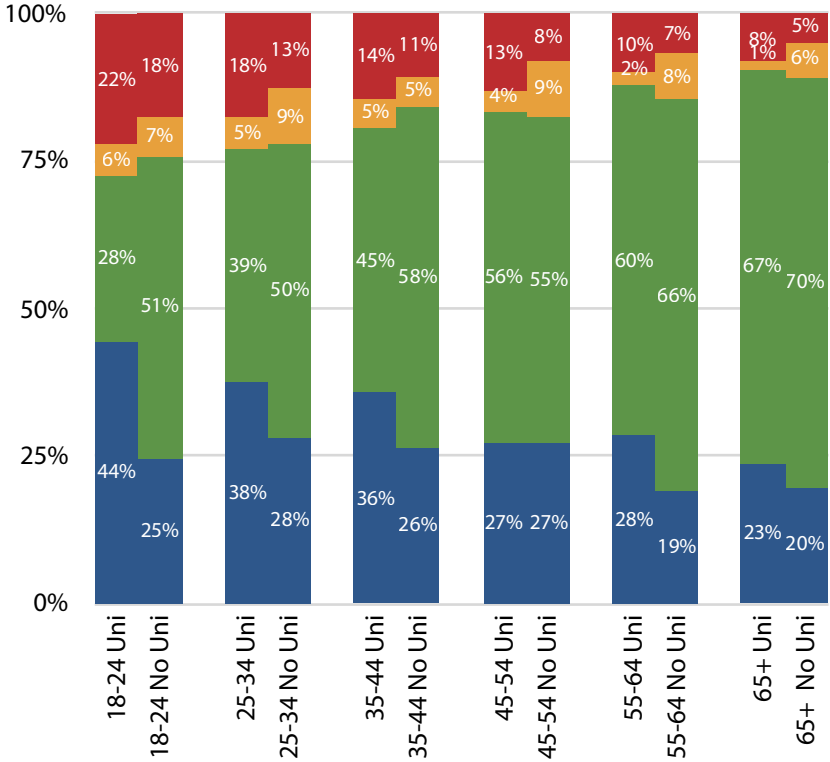
educational background to them and 40 per cent say they would prefer a long-term romantic partner to have similar political beliefs to them, compared with 23 per cent of those who did not go to university.

Thinking back to before the first national lockdown in England, in March 2020. When did you last visit a university in England before that time, for whatever reason?



Source: UPP Foundation / *HEPI, Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey,* 2021, p.25

How people tend to say their friends' education aligns with their own, across age groups, split by university attendance



- Most of my close friends are different from me in terms of educational background and having a degree from a university or not
- Don't know
- There is no clear pattern as to the educational background of my close friends
- Most of my close friends are similar to me in terms of educational background and having a degree from a university or not

Source: UPP Foundation / HEPI, *Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey*, 2021, p.67

Does this homogeneity among a graduate's social circle make it harder to demonstrate our sector's value to others?

This Debate Paper is not going to prove a causal link one way or another, but collectively these findings show how important it is for universities to engage actively with people and communities who – in general terms – have a different demographic profile to those who work and study in universities.

Free speech

The third element of the culture wars relates to free speech and how minority opinion is treated. In 2019, King's College London conducted a poll which found over 30 per cent of Conservative-supporting students feel they are unable to express their views on campus, compared to 20 per cent of left-leaning students. There was also a similar split with Brexit: 32 per cent of those who voted to leave the EU felt unable to express their views, compared to 23 per cent of those who voted to remain.[35] Similarly, in August 2020, Policy Exchange published a report that included a poll of 820 current and retired academics that showed more self-censorship among right-wing academics. It also found that one-in-three academics would discriminate against someone who supported the Leave side when hiring for a position.[36]

These are only a couple of examples of chilling effects in higher education and there are limitations with such research. For example, the subsamples of Conservatives / Right and Leavers in both studies are small. The Policy Exchange report has been criticised for its methodology and claims about providing a representative sample of academics.

As valid as it is to challenge and question research methods, these criticisms tend to miss the bigger picture. Academics and students are human – their behaviour is unlikely to be markedly different to behaviour in wider society. And there are clear issues in wider society.

While the divisions in England are not as profound as in some other countries, we are currently living through a period of polarisation – with Brexit the most notable example. A study in 2018 found that only half the population of different Brexit groups were happy to talk across the divide and significantly fewer were happy for their children to marry someone from the other side of the debate.[37]

However, a report from the King's Policy Institute concluded that polarisation is not just a short-term reaction to the recent political environment; it also reflects the fracturing of public attitudes over several decades.[38] And while COVID initially brought us together in the wake of the disaster, separate studies for the Office for National Statistics and British Future found longstanding divisions becoming more prominent as the pandemic progressed.[39] Consequently, prejudice against, hostility towards and 'othering' people with opposing views is a problem across society.

Are universities immune to this trend? Common sense suggests not. Recent high-profile cases, with the Kathleen Stock example one of the most prominent, are concerning. But beyond the high-profile cases, there is a real concern over general low-grade weakening of civil norms, particularly (but not only) online.

According to researchers Fabio Sabatini and Tommaso Reggiani, incivility is perceived as the norm of online interaction rather than the exception.[40] That is certainly the case when it comes to the debate about universities. A trawl of

academic Twitter would uncover a vast array of hostile tweets about political opponents, academic rivals and university leaders.

It does not take a huge leap to recognise the negative impact this culture may have on free speech. To take an example: if an academic publicly calls Conservatives 'vermin' on social media, would it be a great surprise if Conservative-leaning students being taught by the same academic might be reluctant to share their views in a seminar?[41] That is just one tiny example of many, but it is important to note that, in general, 86 per cent of students felt the widespread use of social media has allowed people to express intolerant views.[42]

This leads to the conclusion that dominant opinions on campus, and how they intersect with academic culture, is an important issue. If the environment is hostile to opposing or contrary views, people with minority opinions are more likely to be impacted.

Recommendations: One Nation University – appreciated by people across the values divide

The Government's response to recent debates is the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill. There is an important debate being had on the merits of legislation. But while state action can hinder or help free speech, it is what universities as autonomous institutions and what individual staff and students do as responsible citizens that really matters in shaping behaviour and culture on campus.

One thing universities and the wider higher education sector can do is to recognise that there are problems to overcome. Only when there is this recognition can we start to find solutions.

Equally policymakers and commentators on the right and elsewhere can help by not exaggerating problems, nor inflaming cultural division further. They should look to collaborate with the sector to address these issues rather than pit themselves in opposition to universities.

There is no silver bullet, and this will require long-term cultural change within universities. Nevertheless, this paper includes a set of recommendations within three areas to help shift the sector in a positive direction:

i. finding common ground;

ii. engaging with all; and

iii. supporting thought diversity.

Finding the common ground

Cultural flashpoints are not going away so in addition to better engagement universities need to adopt approaches which navigate the culture wars.

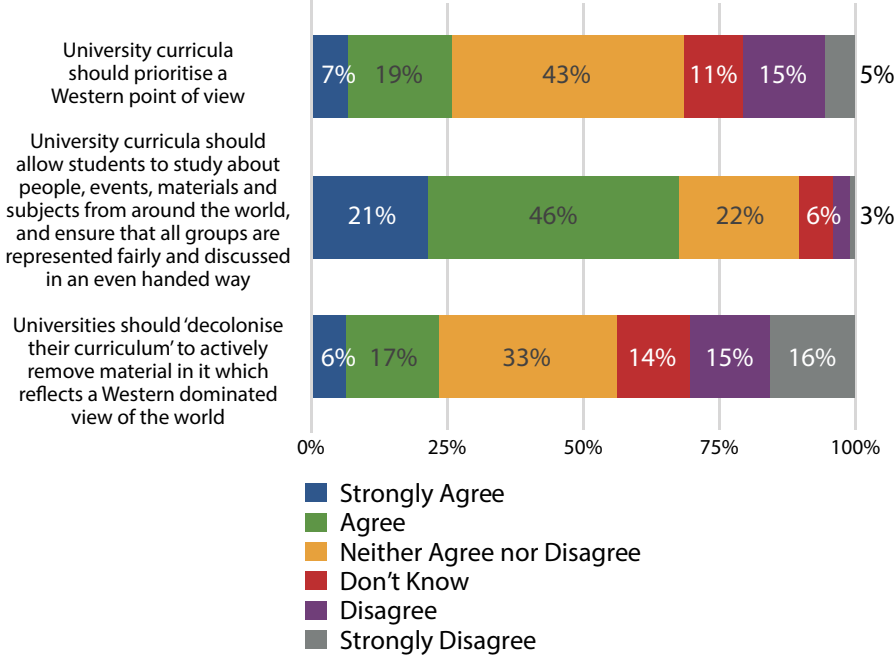
Universities could develop an ethical framework for how they manage cultural clashes

The writer Ian Leslie has discussed the need for organisations to develop 'ethical scenario-planning' when dealing with cultural conflict.[43] As Leslie says, you cannot predict specific controversies, but you can predict what kinds of situations are going to arise and how to think about them. This framework would include rehearsing debates internally so all positions are understood, airing conflicting points of view and slowing down decision-making.

Universities should also carefully consider their communications. When they decide to make a change involving a cultural issue, they should look to understand

the values of people who may not typically agree with the change and frame positions which look to persuade a broad spectrum of society. A good example of this is from the UPP Foundation / HEPI polling on decolonising the curriculum. While the public are largely hostile or in two minds when universities frame changes as 'decolonisation', when asked about broadening the curriculum to take in 'people, events, materials and subjects from around the world', 67 per cent approve – with just 4 per cent against.

Perceptions on curriculum content change with different terms



Source: UPP Foundation / HEPI, *Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey*, 2021, p.59

This is one illustration of the power of effective communication to reduce conflict, while at the same time providing the bandwidth to implement changes that make universities more inclusive. When there are cultural conflicts between the values of staff and students and the wider public, universities should research how groups react to different arguments and frame an argument which has the most resonance.

One way to do this would be to **take inspiration from Citizen Assemblies. In addition to seeking the views of staff and students, universities could recruit – ideally from those without much of prior connection to the university – a representative sample of local citizens to learn about, deliberate and make recommendations in relation to cultural conflicts.**

Engaging with all

To be a truly One Nation sector universities need to be more active in understanding what motivates working-class communities and engage with them on their terms.

Given the shocking statistics on who visits university campuses, there should be a concerted effort to get more people from all backgrounds to visit universities – not just for one-off events – but to use them as part of their everyday lives. **The Office for Students, via the new Director for Fair Access and Participation, could fund a small pilot scheme looking at different approaches in different regions for bringing working-class people onto campus**, so they can experience what universities are about. Institutions do lots of this with schools and prospective students, but they should also develop specific approaches which target working-class residents both locally and in the wider region. A tailored approach to parents and grandparents would be welcome too.

Secondly, it should not just be about bringing people onto campus, but also about ensuring the wider civic role focusses on the priorities of the public. This will mean working with community groups in their environments, as well as **developing projects which look to build bridges between students and staff and local communities**.

A good anecdotal example of this is from a pilot project the UPP Foundation funded at the University of Exeter. A small number of students volunteered in a local care home for 10 hours a week for five weeks, with the students participating in activities with the residents. The academics observing the study recorded several positive impacts. These included improved quality of life for the residents and stronger intergenerational relationships.[44]

Micro projects like Exeter's directly connect universities with groups and individuals who do not typically engage with, or directly benefit from, higher education institutions.

Citizen Assemblies could also have a role in testing ideas for projects in local communities, by bringing the public voice into the heart of a university's civic activity.

Supporting thought diversity

We should also focus on supporting diversity of thought in universities. The Heterodox Academy was established in 2015 by academics Jonathan Haidt, Chris Martin and Nicholas Rosenkranz as a response to their concerns about the negative impact a lack of viewpoint diversity has had on the quality of research within their disciplines. It is a sector-led initiative which provides resources, tools and research to support viewpoint diversity. It has around 4,000 members mainly from the US.

As a small organisation it is never going to change US higher education overnight, but it is a welcome bulwark against intolerance of minority views and encourages its members to follow principles of debate set out in its guide *The HxA Way*.[45]

Led by the sector, with support from the Government, a similar organisation for universities and academics should be established. This organisation would be focussed on the issues related to viewpoint diversity and pluralism in England. In addition to providing useful resources and tools, it could develop leadership training programmes and consultancy on how thought diversity should be considered within recruitment and progression practices alongside other important priorities to diversify the workforce.

Given the hostility of debate online, **universities should also consider further guidance around social media use for academics**. There is an inherent irony in asking for someone to self-censor so others can speak up, but while academics and university staff should not be penalised for sharing their opinions on their personal social media, employers should rightfully expect some level of professional conduct on public social media channels. A newly formed Heterodox Academy for England could help, with universities providing updated guidance to support viewpoint diversity and civility within the academy online.

3. Revitalising community: on and off campus

Study is the purpose of attending university, but through experiencing lots of different things a student finds out who they are, what they want to be and how they want to grow. This immersive community experience helps to build a sense of belonging among the student population and is critical to their wellbeing and future success.

This was well put by the businessman Adam Pritzker, when he talked about the value of the student experience to well-known technology entrepreneurs who famously dropped out of university:

> *They all thought of those ideas in college. That environment of intense collaboration and camaraderie and community within the setting of a more formal education environment creates a kind of alchemy.*[46]

As Pritzker acknowledges, community is what underpins this. It is the relationships developed through the campus environment that is fundamental to the unique and special university experience.

Post-liberal commentators often talk about the importance of community, but rarely consider the potential for an expanded university sector to be at the heart of community renewal.

To me that is a big hole in their position – and is a big difference with the One Nation university vision – which aims to strengthen community on and off campus for the benefit of students and wider society.

While participation in an immersive community-led student experience is important to the individual and wider society, it

does need to be strengthened. As this chapter will document, participation is unequal and when we look at it through the lens of student loneliness and social capital, we see similar gaps which need to be filled.

Unequal participation in the university community

We too often see a 'two nations' student experience: middle-class students are much more likely to be able to take part and benefit from the immersive university community than their working-class peers.

For example, the Sutton Trust found just over half of recent graduates from working-class backgrounds took part in student societies, compared to almost two thirds of better-off students. They also found similar gaps in participation for work experience placements and opportunites to study abroad.[47] Various other studies have shown more disadvantaged socio-economic groups participate less in work experience and internship opportunities.[48]

During COVID community life has been disrupted for all students. Polling found that 50 per cent of students had not participated in any extra-curricular activities.[49] Other research found that when activities migrated to online platforms, the participation gap between middle- and working-class students widened further.[50]

But the immersive community experience is not simply a 'nice to have'. Research demonstrates that participation and social integration within the wider student experience is the key to belonging. And belonging is critical to student wellbeing, attainment and graduate success. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that as universities grapple with the support students

need to regain confidence and a sense of control over their experience, belonging has emerged as the critical issue for the UPP Foundation's Student Futures Commission.

The immersive community experience is at the heart of fostering belonging, so unequal participation is a problem. This is underlined further when we look more specifically at it through the lens of student loneliness and social capital.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a major issue affecting young people and students. Before the pandemic, Wonkhe published research showing over 15 per cent of students felt lonely on a daily basis, rising to 33 per cent on a weekly basis.51 Just over a third of the students who are lonely on a daily basis feel they belong at their university, compared to 82 per cent of those who never feel lonely. The same survey also found that students who live at home with their parents, LGBT and disabled students are the loneliest. Whereas students who went to a private school and those that live in a house share were less likely to report being lonely.

These figures relate to the world before COVID-19. But with lockdowns and other containment measures disrupting social interactions, existing social ills have been exacerbated. Polling by Opinium found that while 76 per cent of UK adults say they have experienced feelings of loneliness during COVID-19, this rises to 89 per cent among 18-to-34-year olds.[52] Among students, a survey found that 85 per cent said the pandemic had made it more difficult for them to make friends.[53] A study for Student Minds showed that two-thirds of students said they have 'often felt isolated or lonely since March 2020'.[54]

Social capital and connecting different groups

A related issue to loneliness is social capital. We know social networks and community are critical to providing individuals with the resources to succeed. Networks facilitate information sharing, contacts and job opportunities and also help build resilience. Social capital enables students to have a sense of belonging with their institution – vital to their ability to succeed academically. We also know social capital – in particular, bridging social capital which builds ties with people outside of a shared identity – is unevenly distributed. Those from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to have gained social capital from their families and peer groups. This helps them get good jobs and ultimately live fulfilling lives. Yet those from non-traditional backgrounds are less likely to have access to these networks and relationships.[55]

The importance of community to bridging social capital also ties in with the issue of polarisation described in the previous chapter. A new report from Power to Change and The Cares Family states that 'shortfalls of bridging social capital fuel the growth of "othering" narratives and can lead people to withdraw from community life even if they belong to the majority group'.[56] Research has shown that bridging social capital tends to increase tolerance of different people, values and beliefs through contact with a diverse range of people.[57]

Bringing this together it is clear relationships, social networks, friendships and community – the heart of the immersive student experience – are critical in preventing mental ill-health and loneliness, as well as supporting social capital, future job prospects and bridging social divides. But many students, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, do

not participate in the university community.

The reasons for inequitable participation are varied. They include factors relating to confidence and lifestyle choices as well as the socio-economic circumstances of students. One-third of respondents in the Sutton Trust survey who did not take part in student societies said paid work commitments were a barrier.[58] The 2019 Wonkhe survey found students who work more than 15 hours a week during term time are also less likely to be involved.[59]

These barriers have been exacerbated by the pandemic and there is a real concern that, unless they are tackled, there will be a significant long-term effect on young people and students. Therefore, as we recover and renew the student experience, we must make participation in an immersive community core for all students.

Recommendations: A One Nation student experience

There are several good examples of universities actively supporting communities, but it is also fair to say that challenges remain in terms of scale and translating good practice into an offer for all students. A recent Universities UK report concluded 'a number of universities acknowledge the need to scale up their initiatives and note the challenges inherent in doing so'.[60] It was also noted within the University Mental Health Charter that 'much work to support social integration and the creation of friendship groups, within universities, is often ad hoc and unevaluated'.[61]

As the sector moves towards more flexible provision, there is an urgent need for an approach which includes all students regardless of how they study or where they live. Given many of the barriers to participation relate to socio-economic circumstances there requires a policy response, as well as a change in approach from universities.

Therefore, this paper makes three broad recommendations:

i. embed the immersive community experience within the curriculum;

ii. develop a voluntary student community service programme; and

iii. encourage universities and students' unions to adopt an access and participation agenda for extra-curricular opportunities.

Embedding community service within the curriculum

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Tulane University in New Orleans decided it could not return to the pre-crisis status quo. Instead, it made the decision to pivot its mission towards social innovation and community engagement. A One Nation University would take inspiration from the example of Tulane, and following the aftermath of the pandemic, embed community and service into the curriculum for all.

Service learning is an educational experience based upon a partnership between the university and the community, providing learning-by-doing skills to meet genuine community needs. Tulane require all undergraduates to complete two semesters of service-learning (between 20 and 40 hours).

According to Tulane, service learning has led to improvements with application numbers, selectivity, rankings, retention, graduation rates and diversity among the student population and enhanced career paths for students.[62]

Tulane is far from the only university taking an active lead on embedding community engagement and service within the education offer. This example is fascinating, however, for two reasons: the pivot after Hurricane Katrina, towards rebuilding

the social infrastructure of New Orleans, could demonstrate the way for universities that have recommitted to the civic agenda in the UK following the pandemic; and secondly the fact every undergraduate undertakes two semesters of service learning.

Engagement in an immersive community experience is particularly challenging for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and for those who live at home with their parents and guardians. **If we want all students to participate in, and benefit from, a wider immersive experience like Tulane, we need to embed it through the curriculum for all**. By linking service and community learning through a degree, all students will benefit from what Adam Pritzker called 'that environment of intense collaboration and camaraderie and community'.

While universities' approach to teaching and learning are autonomous, **the Government could support and incentivise this through pilot funding approaches which look at developing and scaling up a comprehensive community service-learning offer**. The pilot could also look at ways quality and standards can be maintained without encouraging grade inflation, while also ensuring students receive credit towards their degree for community service learning. The aim of the pilots would be to uncover the institutional and external barriers from such a bold undertaking and show ways for universities to mitigate these challenges.

Student community service

The COVID crisis has been particularly difficult for young people. As we recover, there needs to be a new offer to Generation Z – helping them to catch-up and renew from the loss of social contact and formative experiences.

Yet participation in an immersive community experience is more challenging for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper supports the **creation of a community service programme for students**. This could either be extra-curricular and outside of the formal service-learning programme or integrated into that offer.

Volunteering enhances life satisfaction, health, happiness and provides a sense of purpose and belonging to the volunteer. It enables people to give something back to their local community, helping places overcome social and environmental challenges.

France, Germany, Sweden and the US all have civic service schemes tailored for young people. Yet while there are smaller initiatives in the UK, there is not anything of the equivalent size and scale to an AmeriCorps type programme, which places around 270,000 volunteers in around 2,000 organisations annually.[63]

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, with rising concerns around youth unemployment, there have been moves to develop something similar in the UK. Danny Kruger MP published a review of the role of the voluntary sector for the Government last summer, which recommended the creation of a Service programme within Kickstart. Similarly, the economist Will Hutton and Labour MP Rushanara Ali have been leading a 'National Youth Corps' initiative.[64]

In a time of crisis bold ideas emerge and in that vein this paper endorses this growing movement. A student community service programme should be developed as either part of these wider initiatives or as a standalone concept. The idea would be for participating students to volunteer 100 hours of service in their local communities over the course of an academic year, for an appropriate honorarium.

This Debate Paper includes broad concepts for a student community service programme, rather than a detailed plan:

- the programme could be run by a small national organisation with regional hubs and delivered through participating universities;
- universities would recruit students, manage the administration and place the volunteers with local organisations;
- participation should be open to all students – one of the benefits is for different groups of students and local communities to mix – and therefore an appropriate size of honorarium would be available for all participants;
- however, to encourage high levels of participation among more disadvantaged students, who, as the evidence suggests, need to engage to close gaps around participation, loneliness and social capital, they should receive a student premium - **this could be in the form of a maintenance grant in addition to their loan or more attractive loan repayment terms as a quid pro quo for giving something back, despite more challenging circumstances than other students;**
- each participating university should also have clear access targets to reach the disadvantaged;
- the national body would have a role in overseeing the quality of the volunteering placements; and
- locally, the scheme should tie in with a university's Access and Participation Plans and Civic University Agreements to ensure volunteering schemes link with the most pressing local challenges.

Over time, the aim should be for 50,000 students to participate in this national scheme.

Access and participation agenda for extra-curricular activities

At their best, students' unions act as facilitators and a network for campus civil society. They are critical to the student experience because they enable the development and growth of thousands of student-led university clubs and societies. **Universities and students' unions should work together on an agenda around inclusive participation in the campus community.** This would involve measuring engagement with harder-to-reach groups, focusing behavioural campaigns on participation and universities providing additional funding to students' unions if participation targets are met.

Conclusion

The 'in-between' times we are living through are challenging and uncertain. But as with any period of change it offers us a chance for renewal.

Before a new era is settled and as the country recovers from the pandemic, universities and policymakers have choices to make. Do we stick with the status quo and continue to be valued by only some of the country? Or do we embark on a radical post-liberal departure? Limiting access and the potential for higher education to transform lives and support the renewal of communities? Or can we find a better way?

A better – more balanced – way is what we need. Universities, while autonomous, require a favourable policy environment to thrive. The Government needs a large and successful university sector if it is to level up the country.

Benjamin Disraeli said it was on 'the education of the people that the fate of this country depends'. He understood, like many guardians of the One Nation flame who came after, that unlocking potential and expanding opportunity is a cornerstone to a just society.

To overcome the difficulties we are facing we should embrace the One Nation University. An agenda which removes the sharper edges of the market to ensure fairness for non-traditional students, graduates and taxpayers. An agenda which promotes civility, civic engagement and thought diversity in a time of division. And an agenda which strengthens community, on and off campus, to the benefit of all.

Endnotes

1 Jonathan Grant, *The New Power University*, 2021

2 Alistair Lexden, *One Nation Conservatism – Created by Baldwin, boosted by the ghost of Disraeli*, 2019

3 Patrick Wintour, 'Ed Miliband moves to claim Disraeli's 'one nation' mantle', *Guardian,* 2 October 2012 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/02/ed-miliband-one-nation-speech1

4 UPP Foundation and HEPI, *Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey*, 2021 https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-UPP-Foundation-HEPI-Public-Attitudes-Survey.pdf

5 A term coined by the Philosopher John Gray in *The New Statesman* to describe a worldview which dominated both major parties from Tony Blair through to David Cameron. Given this paper is attempting to find a better balance between market, state and community rather than reject reforms from the last two decades, he may consider this paper to be too close or even an extension of the Blameron ideology but I like the term, so I have used it!

6 UPP Foundation funded project, case studies provided by the University of Chichester.

7 John Kay and Mervyn King, *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-making for an unknowable future*, 2020

8 London Economics, *Understanding the career paths of AHSS graduates in the UK and their contribution to the economy: Final report for the British Academy*, pp.48-49, April 2019 https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/284/understanding-career_paths-AHSS-graduates.pdf

9 Institute for Fiscal Studies, *The IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities*, 2021, p.3 https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15241

10 MoneySavingExpert, 'Victory for graduates as PM pledges to raise student loan repayment threshold', 2017 https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/2017/10/victory-for-graduates-student-loan-repayment-threshold/

11 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', *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, 2017 https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN217.pdf; Nick Hillman, *No Easy Answers: English student finance in the spending review*, HEPI, 2021 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/No-easy-answers-English-student-finance-in-the-spending-review.pdf

12 Nick Timothy, *Remaking One Nation: The Future of Conservatism*, Polity Press, 2020

13 Geoff Layer, 'Local Solutions for Local Issues' in Nick Hillman (ed.), *It's the finance, stupid!: The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it*, HEPI, p.72, 2015 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/part-time_web.pdf

14 UPP Foundation, 'UPP Foundation Civic University Commission Progress Report', p28, October 2018 https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/UPP-Foundation-Civic-University-Commission-Progress-Report.pdf

15 Sam Bears, Ellie Mulcahy & Eleanor Bernandes, *The underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education*, *LKMco,* 2016 https://www.cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-underrepresentation-of-white-working-class-boys-in-higher-education-baars-et-al-2016.pdf; Neil Harrison, 'Care Leavers in Higher Education: New Statistics but a Mixed Picture', *Department of Education University of Oxford*, 1 September 2020 http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/care-leavers-in-higher-education-new-statistics-but-a-mixed-picture/

16 Rachel Hewitt, *Demand for Higher Education to 2035*, HEPI, 2020 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Demand-for-Higher-Education-to-2035_HEPI-Report-134_FINAL.pdf

17 https://officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/experience-performance-measures/diversity-of-subject-choice-by-region-of-domicile/

18 Higher Education Statistics Agency https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-22 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-52

19 University Council of Modern Languages, *Language Provision in UK Modern Foreign Languages Departments 2019 Survey*, December 2019 https://university-council-modern-languages.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/LanguageProvisionMFLsSurvey2019.pdf

20 Russell Group, 'Investing to meet the skills needs of the UK's future knowledge economy', December 2019 https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5821/t-grant-briefing-dec-2019-final.pdf

21 Elaine Drayton & Ben Waltman, 'Will universities need a bailout to survive the COVID-19 crisis?', *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, 2020, p3 https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN300-Will-universities-need-bailout-survive-COVID-19-crisis.pdf

22 David Skelton, *Little Platoons: How a Revived One Nation Can Empower England's Forgotten Towns and Redraw the Political Map*, *Biteback,* 2019, pp.106-107

23 Office for Students, 'We will not bail out universities in financial difficulty, regulator chair says', 6 November 2018 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/we-will-not-bail-out-universities-in-financial-difficulty-regulator-chair-says/

24 James Frayne, 'Overlooked But Decisive: Connecting with England's Just About Managing classes', *Policy Exchange,* 2015, p.27 https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/overlooked-but-decisive.pdf

25 The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, 'The privilege of public service – given as the Ditchley Annual Lecture', 1 July 2020 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-privilege-of-public-service-given-as-the-ditchley-annual-lecture

26 UPP Foundation, *Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places*, 2019, p24 https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf

27 Kim Parker, 'The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education', Pew Research Center, 19 August 2019 https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/

28 Examples include Herman G. van de Werfhorst, 'Are universities left wing bastions? The political orientation of professors, professionals, and managers in Europe', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 2019 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1468-4446.12716; Chris Hanretty, 'Is the left over represented within academia' 2017 https://medium.com/@chrishanretty/is-the-left-over-represented-within-academia-90b1cbe00e8a; and Scott Jaschik, 'Professors and Politics: What the Research Says', *Inside HigherEd,* 2017 https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/27/research-confirms-professors-lean-left-questions-assumptions-about-what-means

29 John Morgan, 'General Election 2017: 54% backing for Labour in THE poll', *Times Higher Education,* June 2017 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/general-election-2017-54-per-cent-backing-for-labour-in-poll and Simon Baker, 'Labour vote set to hold up among HE staff, THE survey suggests', *Times Higher Education,* December 2019 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/labour-vote-set-hold-among-he-staff-survey-suggests

30 HEPI, 'New polling shows students' support for the Labour Party has grown under Keir Starmer and students have become more politicised since the start of 2020' press release, 24 September 2020 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/09/24/new-polling-shows-students-support-for-the-labour-party-has-grown-under-keir-starmer-and-students-have-become-more-politicised-since-the-start-of-2020/

31 Teacher Tapp, 'How would teachers vote in a General Election', 2018 https://teachertapp.co.uk/teachers-vote-general-election-intentions-predict/; and Kate L Mandeville, Rose-Marie Satherley, Jennifer Hall, Shailen Sutaria, Chris Willott, Kielan Yarrow, Keerthi Mohan, Ingrid Wolfe and Delan Devakumar 'The political views of doctors in the United Kingdom: a cross-sectional study', *UCL*

32 More in Common, 'Dousing the Flames: How leaders can better navigate cultural change in 2020s Britain', 2021, p.4 https://www.moreincommon.com/media/q43lim5p/dousing-the-flames-uk-mic-report-july-2021.pdf

33 Helen Lewis, 'The World is Trapped in America's Culture War', *The Atlantic*, 27 October 2020 https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/10/internet-world-trapped-americas-culture-war/616799/

34 UPP Foundation and HEPI, *Public Attitudes to Higher Education in England Survey*, 2021, p.25 https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-UPP-Foundation-HEPI-Public-Attitudes-Survey.pdf

35 Jonathan Grant, Kirstie Hewlett, Tamar Nir and Bobby Duffy, *Freedom of expression in UK universities*, King's College London, December 2019 https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/freedom-of-expression-in-uk-universities.pdf

36 Remi Adekoya, Eric Kaufmann and Thomas Simpson, 'Academic Freedom in the UK', *Policy Exchange,* August 2020 https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Academic-freedom-in-the-UK.pdf

37 Sara Hobolt, Thomas Leeper and James Tilley, 'Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of the Brexit Referendum', *British Journal of Political Science*, 2020

38 Bobby Duffy, Kirstie Hewlett, Julian McCrae and John Hall, *Divided Britain?: Polarisation and fragmentation trends in the UK, The Policy Institute, King's College London* September 2019 https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf

39 Office for National Statistics, 'Unity and division in Great Britain: 24 April to 28 June 2020', *ONS,* 25 August 2020 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/unityanddivisioningreatbritain/24aprilto28june2020; British Future 'Remembering the kindness of strangers', 2020, p.8 http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RememberingTheKindnessOfStrangersReport.pdf

40 Fabio Sabatini & Tommaso Reggiani, 'For a Civil Internet – How the tone of online conversations can build trust', *LSE,* 4 April 2019 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2019/04/04/for-a-civil-internet/

41 'Conservative voters 'vermin' jibe by lecturer sparks outrage', 15 December 2019 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-50802948

42 Jonathan Grant, Kirstie Hewlett, Tamar Nir and Bobby Duffy, *Freedom of expression in UK universities*, King's College London, December 2019 https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/freedom-of-expression-in-uk-universities.pdf

43 https://ianleslie.substack.com/p/how-to-stay-calm-in-a-storm

44 The Exeter Intergenerational Project, *Final Report*, University of Exeter, 2020

45 https://heterodoxacademy.org/library/the-hxa-way/

46 David Willetts, *A University Education*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp.144-145

47 Sutton Trust, *The University of Life*, 2021, p.4 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-University-of-Life-Final.pdf

48 Mary Stuart, Catherine Lido, Jessica Morgan, Lucy Solomon and Steve May, 'The impact of engagement with extracurricular activities on the student experience and graduate outcomes for widening participation populations', *Sage,* 2011; and Amy Irwin, E Nordmann & K Simms, 'Stakeholder perception of student employability: does the duration, type and location of work experience matter?', *Higher Education,* 2019

49 UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, 2021 https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/polling-from-group-gti-provides-further-analysis-of-this-years-student-experience/

50 Sutton Trust, *Covid-19 and the University Experience*, 2021 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Covid-19-and-the-University-Experience.pdf

51 UK Trendence Research and Wonkhe, *Opportunity blocked: how student opportunity and SUs relate to student life; belonging and outcomes,* 2019, p.6

52 Power to Change and The Cares Family, *Building our social infrastructure: Why levelling up means creating a more socially connected Britain*, 2021, p18

53 UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, 2021 https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/polling-from-group-gti-provides-further-analysis-of-this-years-student-experience/

54 Nicola Frampton, 'The mental health impacts of Covid-19 will outlast the pandemic itself', *Wonkhe*, 2 August 2021 https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-mental-health-impacts-of-covid-19-will-outlast-the-pandemic-itself/

55 Vanessa Todman, *The Importance of Social Capital*, What Works Department Social Mobility & Student Success, King's College London, 10 December 2018 https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/behaviouralinsights/2018/12/10/the-importance-of-social-capital/ and Vanessa Todman and Susannah Hume, *Sense of belonging and social capital: our hot topics for 2018/19*, King's College London, 30 May 2018 https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/behaviouralinsights/2018/05/30/sense-of-belonging-and-social-capital-our-hot-topics-for-2018-19/

56 Power to Change and The Cares Family, *Building our social infrastructure: Why levelling up means creating a more socially connected Britain*, p.7 https://files.thecaresfamily.org.uk/thecaresfamily/images/Building-our-social-infrastructure-Final.pdf

57 https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/what-is-bridging-social-capital/

58 Sutton Trust, *The University of Life*, 2021, p.5 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-University-of-Life-Final.pdf

59 UK Trendence Research and Wonkhe, *Opportunity blocked: how student opportunity and SUs relate to student life; belonging and outcomes*, 2019, p.14

60 Simon Gaskell and Rebecca Lingwood, *Widening opportunity in higher education: The third phase: beyond graduation*, Universities UK, 2020, p.29

61 Gareth Hughes & Leigh Spanner, *The University Mental Health Charter*, Student Minds, 2019, p.58

62 Kenneth Schwartz, 'Crisis and Adaptation for the Public Good', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 4 May 2020

63 Americorps https://americorps.gov/

64 Will Hutton, 'An open letter: Why we need a national youth corps', *Observer*, 24 May 2020 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/24/an-open-letter-why-we-need-a-national-youth-corps

Trustees

Professor Sally Mapstone (Chair)
Sir David Bell
Mary Curnock Cook CBE
Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow
Professor Dame Helen Wallace

Advisory Board

Alison Allden OBE
Professor Carl Lygo
Professor David Maguire
Professor Nick Pearce
Professor Iyiola Solanke
Professor Mary Stuart

President

Bahram Bekhradnia

Partners

Advance HE
BPP University
Coursera
Elsevier
GatenbySanderson
Handshake
iQ Student Accommodation
Kaplan
Lloyds Bank
Mills & Reeve LLP
Pearson
Research England
Times Higher Education
Unite Students
UPP Group Limited

Nick Timothy CBE, author of *Remaking One Nation: The Future of Conservatism*, Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Theresa May (2017) and Special Adviser in the Home Office (2010-2015)

Richard Brabner has produced a searingly honest analysis of the role universities play in our pursuit of a fairer society and stronger local communities. Such honesty is rare, and it has led him to produce a list of worthy policy proposals that should prompt a serious debate about how we reform higher education.

Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive, Universities UK

In an era where the political classes and media are questioning the purpose and value of universities it is helpful to bring new ideas to stimulate the debate about how universities can benefit the economy and society. This timely and thought-provoking paper sets out a range of interesting observations which challenge universities to consider how they can enhance their positive impact on students, communities and the wider public.

Professor Andy Westwood, Professor of Government Practice and Vice Dean for Social Responsibility, University of Manchester and Special Adviser (2007-2009) to the last Labour Government

Having done so much to establish and deliver the Civic University Commission, Richard Brabner is worth listening to here. His proposals for 'balancing choice and place' are both welcome and timely. In doing so he captures a central challenge for government and for universities themselves – how to deliver the very best teaching and research at the same time as actively supporting local and regional communities. Perhaps as importantly, Richard foresees this agenda as a way of improving the policy dialogue between the government and the sector too.

Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University

This is a thought-provoking contribution to thinking about the social purposes of universities and the way universities can play a cohesive role in a nation facing increasing challenge and division.

Professor Mary Stuart CBE, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lincoln (2009-2021)

Richard Brabner sets out a clear vision for higher education that draws out a clear sense of purpose for universities in the UK. I believe the ideas in this report will resonate strongly with those who believe Universities have a deep social responsibility to support their places and the people of those places.

Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students

I welcome this report from Richard Brabner and HEPI, particularly the proposals to give greater focus across government to the contributions universities make to the places in which they are based, and to position this more strongly within their access and participation work.

Rachel Wolf, founding partner at Public First and co-author of the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto

If the Government wants to forge a better partnership with higher education, and universities overcome the challenges of the next decade they should seriously consider this fascinating and thoughtful report from Richard Brabner.