

**UK higher education –  
policy, practice and debate  
during HEPI's first 20 years**

**Edited by Dr Helen Carasso**

**20** YEAR  
**hepi**  
**ANNIVERSARY**



**HEPI Report 161**

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# Preface

**By Professor Dame Sally Mapstone FRSE, Chair of HEPI**

This collection, which has been edited for HEPI by Dr Helen Carasso of the University of Oxford, brings together a mix of authors to look back at the last 20 years of higher education policy across the UK. It marks HEPI's 20th birthday, as the organisation was founded by Bahram Bekhradnia back in 2002/03.

As the following chapters show, not much has stayed the same throughout the period in question. Twenty years ago, Labour held power at Westminster, Edinburgh and Cardiff (though not in Belfast), the Higher Education Funding Council for England still existed and UKRI had not yet been conceived.

In other respects, however, the higher education scene two decades ago was closer to the situation now. In both 2002/03 and 2022/23, there was rising demand for higher education, university-based research was delivering enormous benefits to students, employers and communities and UK universities were performing well in international comparisons.

The challenge now is how to build on the strengths of all parts of the UK higher education sector when institutions are faced by sharp financial constraints, increased regulatory burdens and political upheaval. This is not an easy task and will call on the full ingenuity of the higher education sector and others. Yet it is too important a challenge to duck and we hope the lessons from the past contained in these diverse contributions will particularly help policymakers, which is – after all – HEPI's core goal.



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## **Foreword: The early years**

### **Bahram Bekhradnia**

In the spring of 2002 I approached Sir Howard Newby, recently appointed Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), where I had been Policy Director for more than 10 years, with the proposition that HEFCE might support me in establishing a think tank devoted to higher education policy analysis.

I had for some time thought that there was need for such a body – other subjects of public interest like health, foreign affairs, environment and so on had think tanks devoted to them – but not higher education. It was true that HEFCE did some outstanding policy analysis – the HEFCE Analytical Services team produced what I still think was some of the very best research on higher education, unmatched before or since – but their work was limited to HEFCE’s immediate policy concerns.

I had previously made the suggestion to Sir Howard’s predecessor but without success. However, Howard Newby is a distinguished social scientist with a keen interest in policy – he had been Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – and he readily agreed. The slight fly in the ointment was that I was at the time a civil servant on secondment from the Education Department and for me to lead this new body he had to get the agreement of Sir David Normington, the Permanent Secretary. No objection was raised, and the establishment of HEPI was announced in the summer of 2002.

There was understandable concern among some – would it be truly independent given my background? Would the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) have the inside track when it came to getting consultancy contracts from public bodies? (HEPI does not carry out consultancy for UK bodies.) Why was the Board of Trustees exclusively male? (A fair point at the time, now redressed with four out of the five trustees female.) We encountered other issues, some arcane. It was important to establish HEPI as a charity, although the Charity Commission was initially not convinced that conducting research and policy analysis was an educational activity! But we overcame such hurdles, and on 1 November 2002 I sat in my office in Oxford (rented from the collegiate University) – and nothing happened. I turned on my computer and no emails! Of course I was going to have to take the initiative and hope that others would respond, a strange experience after being part of large organisations where I had been overwhelmed by correspondence.

We had hope, but no expectation, that HEPI would succeed and certainly not that it would approach its 21st birthday in the shape that it is now in. We had a guarantee of two years of core funding from HEFCE which was essential to enable us to find our feet and generate other sources of funds – and there is a lesson there for anyone thinking of attempting anything similar. The other thing to which I attribute HEPI's ability to get off the ground as quickly as it did, and thrive subsequently, was the fact that we had outstanding and very senior support. Lord Dearing was our first Chairman followed by Professor Sir Graeme Davies, both giants in the higher education world. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, if Ron Dearing asked somebody to do something they would. We had an Advisory



Board and a Board of Trustees comprising some of the most senior members of the higher education and business communities, including a number of senior vice-chancellors and the Chief Executive of Universities UK.

We quickly established 'traditions'. The Annual Lecture which is always given by a highly distinguished speaker – in the early days alternating between a speaker from the UK and from abroad – was from the beginning sponsored by Blackwell's, whose only stipulation was that at the reception afterwards we served real champagne and top-notch canapés. And the House of Commons breakfast seminar series, something that is expensive to run but for which we had no difficulty finding sponsors. At that time, we regarded both these 'traditions' as showcases to cement the HEPI brand and attendance was strictly limited to senior members of different constituencies (academic, business, government). In large part that was to demonstrate that HEPI was a senior and serious player in the higher education world.

Apart from myself and an occasional secretary we had no staff initially, but we soon attracted young secondees and interns as well as volunteers – often unsolicited – to write reports. Tom Sastry and Libby Aston were two and the outstanding John Thompson, a retired senior analyst at HEFCE, who was draconian in his insistence that every piece of analysis that we produced should be unimpeachable in its use of data. There were conclusions that we could reasonably have reached but which we did not publish because they were only 'reasonable' and not proved. Every report that we published – no more than seven or eight in any year, compared to the 25 or so more recently produced each year – was sent in printed form to our mailing list (open to everybody) and uploaded onto

the website. Very often the web reports contained much more data and analysis than the printed versions, and we therefore called them 'summary reports' (almost all of our reports were based on analyses of data, mainly published data but sometimes gathered *ad hoc*). We took the decision at the outset that everything we produced was to be made freely available, as our mission was to ensure that discussions and decisions about higher education should be better informed by evidence than had been the case in the past.

I was nearly 12 years in post, and there were many highs and few lows. Among the highest were demonstrations of our independence and also, oddly, our influence. One of the first reports we produced was about the economic evidence for the expansion of higher education (not entirely positive) and Lord Dearing received a phone call from the Permanent Secretary of the Department saying that the then Minister wanted the report suppressed because it might be taken to undermine the Government's policy. Lord Dearing pointed out to him how bad it would look if it were known that a Minister had tried to suppress the report of an independent think tank – and we heard nothing more. He also remarked how impressive it was that the Department thought a report from us was worth suppressing.

In 2006, we produced a report estimating that the enlargement of the EU would lead to an additional 25,000 to 30,000 EU students, which was denounced by the Minister at the time as a hopeless exaggeration (perhaps spooked by the newspaper headline 'University invasion from the new EU states').<sup>1</sup> In the event, the number of students from the new EU states reached 30,000.

Some time after, following the increase in home undergraduate fees to £3,000 a year in 2006, we produced an analysis, perhaps provocatively called *The prosperity of English universities* which showed how well off they now were.<sup>2</sup> A disadvantage of an Advisory Board made up of such distinguished members of the higher education establishment was that they were very sensitive to any suggestion that universities were not in a parlous state financially – especially as at that very time there were difficult pay negotiations going on. The Advisory Board was hostile and did not want the report published. But as I pointed out to them then, the Advisory Board was precisely that – advisory – and we published anyway. There were no good reasons not to, other than that it might cause embarrassment. There were no quarrels with the analysis.

And in 2010, following John Thompson's devastating analysis of the Government's student fees policy, David Willetts, on the floor of the House of Commons, described the HEPI analysis as 'eccentric' but then a year later to the Select Committee admitted that HEPI was right 'but for the wrong reasons!'<sup>3</sup>

Among our most referenced reports are the regular updates on student demand where, to our surprise, we found there were no sensible similar analyses produced officially. The Department did produce their own estimates but these were, curiously, based on taking individual government policies and estimating the impact each would have on demand assuming they were successful (which they often were not). Ours are based on trends and examine alternative scenarios, including students from poorer backgrounds increasing their participation, and similarly males matching the performance of females – as they had once done.

With regard to the latter, we produced a series of reports showing not only that men were less likely to go to university than women, but that once at university they did not do as well. One of those reports gave rise to a front-page headline from the *Sun* 'Uni Sex Scandal!' It also elicited a comment from a Professor of Gender Studies accusing John Thompson and me of 'castration anxieties'. A subsequent report that looked at the experience of graduates leaving university explored possible reasons why female graduates earned less than male graduates in their first job, dispelling the conventional wisdom that this was a function of subjects studied – the pay differential holds even within a subject.<sup>4</sup>

Then, there was our finding that students from state schools obtain better degrees than those from independent schools with the same grades. Unsurprisingly, that gave rise to fury from the independent school sector which attempted to rubbish the findings – but the analysis was unimpeachable.

But the series of reports with which I am most pleased are those *The Academic Experience of Students*, now known as the *Student Academic Experience Survey*. This series is based on large surveys of students and asks questions about a range of issues, most notably how much contact they have with staff, how many hours they devote to private study and so on. That has been conducted pretty well every year since 2006, which has allowed a long and valuable time series. And it shows an extraordinary consistency which enables confidence in its findings. For example, it showed that in 2006 students, on average, had 13.7 contact hours per week and in 2022 they had 13.4. It showed that in 2006 taking contact hours and private study together, students studied for 25.7 hours per week and in 2022 they studied for 26.1 hours (they also on average had

4.6 hours of placement or field trips but that refinement was not included in the early surveys).<sup>5</sup>

We were able subsequently to compare these figures with those of other European countries, with the unsurprising conclusion that students here were able to obtain their degrees with significantly less study than those in most other countries. Initially those reports received a hostile reception from vice-chancellors and others who argued that study – and especially contact – hours were a measure of input, but that what was important was the quality of the outcomes, which is a rather fatuous argument implying no relationship between how hard you work and the outcomes achieved or alternatively that English students are cleverer and that their educators are better than their European counterparts.

More generally, it has been an extraordinary period to be involved in higher education policy. In this time we have moved from the £1,000 fee, payable upfront, to the £3,000 fee with a loan to the £9,000 fee, also with a loan, which probably costs the government as much as the £3,000 fee regime.

In England, we have moved from HEFCE as the relatively benign guardian of the national higher education system and its interest in maintaining the health of the sector to the Office for Students (OfS), a body that appears incoherent, that has no interest in the sector and whose *modus operandi* is to wag its finger at universities and tell them that they should be doing better – however well they are doing.

And we have moved from higher education acknowledged to be a national as well as a private good to higher education as a commodity, like gas or water, which students purchase as

consumers and which therefore needs a regulator to protect the student-consumers, as do gas and water.

And higher education is increasingly a victim of culture wars, with challenges in relation to freedom of speech, antisemitism and wokeness being levelled at institutions and their staff for simply doing what they believe is right.

There have been changes, and many of them have not been for the better, but all that is grist to our mill, and I am pleased – perhaps even a little surprised – that HEPI will soon have achieved its 21st year. Have we succeeded in our aim of ensuring that policy discussions and decisions are better informed by evidence? Difficult to tell, but I like to hope so. What is encouraging is the evidence that we have maintained confidence in what we do, and that we are a valuable resource worth nurturing. The facts that almost all universities are willing to pay a subscription to HEPI (originally encouraged by Sarah Isles, HEPI's outstanding first Development Director), in return for which they receive few significant direct benefits (and therefore in essence pay to ensure that we keep going), and that we have 18 commercial partners are indicative of that, as is the fact that we remain the first port of call for both print and broadcast journalists wishing to make sense of what is going on – as is witnessed by the number of times that we appear on the radio or are quoted in newspapers.

I am so pleased that we have achieved this milestone, and that on every indication we are in as strong a place as we have ever been under the knowledgeable and enthusiastic stewardship of Nick Hillman, my successor as Director. And of course, I am delighted that so distinguished a group of higher education's most knowledgeable and experienced experts have agreed to contribute these essays to help us celebrate.

## Notes

- 1 Bahram Bekhradnia, *Demand for Higher Education to 2020*, HEPI Report 22, March 2006 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2006/03/21/demand-for-he-to-2020/>
- 2 Bahram Bekhradnia, *The prosperity of English universities Income growth and the prospects for new investment*, HEPI Report 26, September 2006 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2006/09/07/the-prosperity-of-english-universities-income-growth-and-the-prospects-for-new-investment/>
- 3 John Thompson and Bahram Bekhradnia, *The government's proposals for higher education funding and student finance – an analysis*, HEPI Report 50, November 2010 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2010/11/11/the-governments-proposals-for-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance-an-analysis/>
- 4 John Thompson and Bahram Bekhradnia, *Male and female participation and progression in Higher Education*, HEPI Report 41, June 2009 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2009/06/05/male-and-female-participation-and-progression-in-higher-education/> and John Thompson and Bahram Bekhradnia, *Male and female participation and progression in higher education: further analysis*, HEPI Report 48, July 2010 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2010/07/04/male-and-female-participation-and-progression-in-higher-education-further-analysis/>
- 5 The initial, 2006, report Bahram Bekhradnia, Carolyn Whitnall and Tom Sastry, *The academic experience of students in English universities*, HEPI Report 27, October 2006 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2006/10/31/the-academic-experience-of-students-in-english-universities-2006-report/>. Subsequent versions are available on the HEPI website and the most recent edition is Jonathan Neves and Rose Stephenson, *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*, HEPI / Advance HE, June 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/06/22/student-academic-experience-survey-2023/>

# **1. Higher education policymaking in the UK before HEPI**

**Roger Brown**

It may seem difficult to believe now that, only 30 years ago, there was limited interest in the working and funding of the nation's universities or in the opportunities they offer to their students. By the start of the twenty-first century though, that had changed and there was a role for a specialist higher education think tank. Reflecting here on the policy climate at the time of the creation of HEPI, I draw on the perspective that I have acquired over that time from roles in central government, a funding council, two representative bodies, a national quality agency, institutional leadership and critical writing about higher education policy.

As a Civil Servant in various Departments, including the Cabinet Office, from 1976 to 1990, I was very aware of two longstanding features of UK government policymaking.

The first was Whitehall's strong predilection for local 'internal' sources of information and evidence – the famous 'not invented here' syndrome. The second, which reflected and contributed to the first, was the weakness of the links between civil servants working in a particular area of policy and the 'outside' experts based, usually in a university, sometimes in a think tank.

Both these features were certainly found in higher education policy but higher education had its own policy pathology, summarised in the following reflection of Sir Eric Ashby, former Master of Clare College Cambridge and Chair of the University Grants Committee:



*All over the country these groups of scholars, who would not make a decision about the shape of a leaf or the derivation of a word or the author of a manuscript without painstakingly assembling the evidence, make decisions about admission policy, size of universities, staff-student ratios, content of courses and similar issues, based on dubious assumptions, scrappy data and mere hunch.<sup>1</sup>*

Three particular things brought all this home to me.

In 1987/88, I was a member of an interdepartmental working party trying to determine future student numbers. The 1987 White Paper *Higher education: meeting the challenge* had suggested two trajectories, one more conservative, one more ambitious.<sup>2</sup> The working party spent at least a couple of years arguing over this, yet by the time we finished, actual numbers in the system far exceeded even the expansion the Department for Trade and Industry (and Employment) had been advocating. One of the main reasons was the success of the new GCSE, which meant many more students staying on into sixth-form, perhaps an unintended consequence of Sir Keith Joseph's decision to merge the old O-Level with the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). Yet I do not recall much discussion of the GCSE or changes in the school curriculum in our meetings. In turn, of course, this unanticipated expansion was one of the reasons for private funding rising up the policy agenda.

When the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics came to an end in early 1993, I worked briefly as Head of Research and Strategy at the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). I was really shocked at how little proper research had been done into many aspects of higher education: such

matters as the research-teaching relationship, staff-student ratios (again!), future employment needs and patterns and the use of IT in student education. The CVCP embarked on its own work on the long-term future of higher education while no one else was doing so.

In the middle of the 1990s, the Government established the Dearing Committee of Inquiry. Although its Terms of Reference were quite broad, for politicians at least its real role was to make private funding of teaching more acceptable. Nevertheless, it instigated inquiries on many aspects of higher education. A colleague of mine, who was seconded to the committee's secretariat, complained about how little proper knowledge there appeared to be within higher education on many of these questions, and how much research they had had to commission (and later publish), much of it from outside higher education. In private, Sir Ron (later Lord) Dearing, HEPI's first Chair, made similar remarks to me.

All this was fairly astonishing given the greatly increased scale and importance of the sector and higher education's much vaunted role as society's Research and Development arm.

This then was the context in which HEPI was conceived, but as always there was a micro aspect as well.

Someone I then knew well was Professor (later Sir) Howard Newby, at this time Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (previously Vice-Chancellor of Southampton, and subsequently Vice-Chancellor of the Universities of the West of England and of Liverpool). Howard had been Chair of the Economic and Social Research Council. Both he and I therefore had considerable experience

of government policymaking, at a time when some of the major generalist think tanks were starting to show an interest in higher education. We agreed that there was a need for a dedicated policy think tank that would sit between – but be independent of – the Government and the sector, and which would study and comment on precisely those issues that were important for policy but which had been under, or poorly, researched either by the sector or by those outside it.

Building on these conversations, Howard was able to get wider support for the idea (including from the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and Skills), while I gave some thought to the structure and resources HEPI would need. I am delighted to be able to say that under first Bahram's and now Nick's leadership, HEPI has more than fulfilled this remit, so I am delighted to be able to contribute to this celebration.

## Notes

- 1 Eric Ashby, 'Introduction: Decision-Making in the Academic World', *The Sociological Review*, vol.7 no.1, 1959, pp.5-13 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1959.tb036> p6
- 2 Department for Education and Science, *Higher education: meeting the challenge*, 1987 <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/wp1987/1987-higher-ed.html>

## **2. To measure is to know: two decades of change in UK higher education through the lens of the sector's own statistics**

**Helen Carasso and Andrew Plume**

*To measure is to know*

Attributed to William Thomson, 1st Baron Kelvin (1824–1907)

As HEPI marks 20 years of debate and constructive criticism on matters relating to higher education in the UK and beyond, it has invited expert researchers, practitioners and commentators to reflect on the way that tertiary education has developed over that time. To provide a context for these contributions, we first begin with summary data, which illustrate shifts in the scale and scope of UK higher education during the life of HEPI to date.

The large majority of the figures used here to create an outline of the size and shape of the sector (and increasingly *sectors*, with the devolution of responsibility for education policy within the UK during this period) are drawn from publicly available sources such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the admissions service UCAS and Funding Councils / Office for Students (OfS).<sup>1</sup> This reflects not only the accountability that is expected of organisations that receive public funds, but also a long-standing collegial attitude among institutions toward data sharing and re-use.

The sector's commitment to the collection and publication of a wide range of data about its activities, participants and resources can be traced back to the Robbins Report of 1963.<sup>2</sup> The review committee decided to base its recommendations on evidence-based forecasts of likely demand for higher

education up to 20 years ahead. These were prepared by a group of economists led by Claus Moser, who was then at the London School of Economics. The resulting data became one of the foundations for the findings of the committee and its report emphasised the importance of such an evidence base, recommending that sector-wide data-collection along the lines developed by Moser and his team should continue.

As anyone who works within a planning section, finance department, research services office or registry of a UK university today knows, annual data returns cover most aspects of an institution's activities, inputs and outputs. So consistent (and hence comparable) is this data that, from around the time that HEPI was created, these figures formed the basis for annual Performance Indicators (PIs). PIs are devised and published by the Funding Councils / OfS, each accompanied by an institution-specific 'sector-adjusted' benchmark.<sup>3</sup>

The consistency in collection and reporting within data for a single year may though be weaker when attempting comparisons between different years. This is because definitions of what is to be recorded may have been refined, or sometimes adjusted more radically, in response to changes in the operation or regulation of the higher education system. In the information that follows, such variations across the 20-year period are noted, and their potential implications for the data and their interpretation are discussed.

There is also the underlying question of why such changes were made: are they simply a fine-tuning of previous practice; were they needed to capture the changing nature of provision and / or institutions; or do they highlight aspects of institutional behaviours that there is political will to influence? As such, the

emphases that have been placed on data collection across the sector over time can offer signals of shifts in the sector itself, or in the way it is thought about by governments and other policymakers.

One such substantial change has been the move to consideration of aspects of higher education, most notably student recruitment, as operating within a marketplace. The potential for anti-competitive behaviours in such a marketplace has drawn UK higher education providers into the orbit of the Competition and Markets Authority.<sup>4</sup> Sector-specific guidance issued by the authority has resulted in caution among institutional leaders about the extent to which it is appropriate or permissible to continue to share data on activities such as student recruitment. While there is clearly a continued will among professional leads to collaborate within networks of shared-interest groups across the sector, it is possible that another 20 years from now we may find that at least some part of the evidence-base that Robbins advocated for so successfully is no longer readily accessible.

## **UK higher education**

To maintain standards within the sector, and hence to protect student ‘consumers’ within this ‘market’, the use of the title ‘University’ and the power to award degrees (Degree-Awarding Powers, DAPs) are both strictly regulated. At the same time, market forces have encouraged a growth in providers, with many in England taking advantage of changes in legislation that enables smaller, often specialist, institutions to register with the OfS for university title and / or DAPs.

*Number of registered higher education providers (with or without DAPs)<sup>5</sup>*

	<b>2002</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>Change</b>
England	131	416	218%
Scotland	18	18	0%
Wales	13	11	-15%
Northern Ireland	2	4	100%
<b>UK</b>	164	449	174%

As the first shows, the significant increase in the membership of the higher education sector in England over the past 20 years has not been reflected elsewhere in the UK. Student number growth however has been more evenly distributed across the country.

*Number of students in UK HE institutions. Undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students are reported separately based on UK (home) or non-UK (int) domiciled status<sup>6</sup>*

	<b>2001/02</b>				<b>2021/22</b>			
	<b>UG home</b>	<b>UG int</b>	<b>PG home</b>	<b>PG int</b>	<b>UG home</b>	<b>UG int</b>	<b>PG home</b>	<b>PG int</b>
England	1,231,595	102,910	289,850	102,485	1,420,755	257,220	366,815	297,945
Scotland	141,335	11,070	33,965	10,605	172,780	31,650	45,975	50,785
Wales	86,205	5,585	16,720	4,905	100,505	9,875	23,440	15,215
NI	34,760	2,765	8,885	2,435	40,760	8,725	11,530	8,555
<b>UK</b>	1,493,895	122,335	349,425	120,430	1,734,805	307,470	447,760	372,500

As the unit-of-resource available to institutions to educate each home undergraduate has fluctuated in real terms over this period, universities have responded in different ways to try to make up any underfunding on teaching: for example, many have sought to increase the number of students on programmes with uncapped fees.<sup>7</sup> These are mainly either full-fee paying international undergraduates (which since 2021 includes those from the EU) or taught postgraduates (from

UK HE institution income by source (£, thousands)<sup>8</sup>

Income	Tuition fees and education contracts		Research grants and contracts		Funding body grants		Donations, endowments and investment income		Other income	
	2001/02	2021/22	2001/02	2021/22	2001/02	2021/22	2001/02	2021/22	2001/02	2021/22
<b>England</b>	2,827,714	21,628,350	1,986,518	5,711,634	4,550,854	3,958,006	220,336	1,107,654	2,253,654	7,251,256
<b>Scotland</b>	309,199	1,687,103	320,521	884,743	693,453	1,247,630	25,283	89,803	315,005	687,085
<b>Wales</b>	143,067	1,017,158	87,984	255,540	299,582	313,393	10,697	14,477	155,148	277,086
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	58,214	266,923	38,395	129,992	148,201	223,632	1,810	7,527	45,240	91,947
<b>UK</b>	3,338,194	24,599,534	2,433,418	6,981,909	5,692,090	5,742,661	258,126	1,219,461	2,769,047	8,307,374



home and abroad). This has resulted in a shift in the balance of the income streams for the higher education sector in each of the four countries of the UK.

The financial sustainability of UK universities therefore relies on cross-subsidies from one area of activity to another.<sup>9</sup> Such cross-subsidies are made apparent through TRAC (the Transparent Approach to Costing or TRAC), which was developed by the sector to enable its members to meet Funding Council expectations concerning the accounting of public money. TRAC was, however, only in its infancy 20 years ago and hence neither universities nor the public bodies responsible for their oversight then had a definitive picture of relationships between income streams and activities undertaken.<sup>10</sup> TRAC is now used routinely and, as applied to the annual accounts of institutions, has led the Office for Students to highlight what it perceives as risks that some universities face because of over-reliance on fees from international students (often from only a small number of countries) to cross-subsidise other activities.<sup>11</sup>

## **Teaching**

The growth in home (UK-domiciled) undergraduate numbers, although accounted for in part by demographic changes, also represents a significant increase in participation rates for younger people, with the politically totemic 50% figure first passed in 2019.<sup>12</sup> This growth reflects greater diversity in the prior experiences and educational qualifications of new students too.

This diversification has been encouraged by the growing emphasis (both from within institutions themselves and from politicians and regulators) on widening participation.

Understanding of what widening participation means in practice has evolved from consideration of straightforward measures of the educational and social background of an applicant to more nuanced indicators, such as comparison between the academic achievements of an individual and the average grades of those with similar profiles. England's Director of Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, now also emphasises that universities within his remit should be acting to achieve equity not only in the admission but also in the progression and completion of students in light of this contextual data.<sup>13</sup>

To assist institutions to assess their relative achievements in equity within their undergraduate education provision, HESA introduced annual Performance Indicators in 2003. These monitored the relative admission, continuation and graduate destinations of those from low-participation neighbourhoods or state schools and of those with a disability. As the table shows in relation to state school entrants, despite a UK-wide increase, trends have not been consistent across the UK; increases in England have been offset by near flat or declining rates elsewhere.

*Proportion of young entrants to full-time first degree courses from state schools<sup>14</sup>*

	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
<b>England</b>	86.4%	90.1%
<b>Scotland</b>	87.5%	86.4%
<b>Wales</b>	91.9%	92.3%
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	99.7%	99.2%
<b>UK</b>	<b>86.0%</b>	<b>90.2%</b>

When taking a UK-wide perspective, it is important to consider individual institutions in relation to their subject-mix and the average age and prior qualifications of entrants. To accompany the Performance Indicators, HESA therefore introduced 'adjusted sector benchmarks' that take these factors into account. Even with this institution-specific dimension, these national Performance Indicators were withdrawn in 2022 because the emphases of regulators in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had gradually diverged to reflect more local policies and priorities. Each part of the UK now publishes its own figures.

Within institutions, there is a concern that measures such as the type of school most recently attended or the participation rate of home neighbourhoods, while straightforward to collect with a high level of accuracy, may not be a good proxy for the socioeconomic status of an applicant.<sup>15</sup> It has also been suggested that well-informed families may make choices, in particular about where children should study for their Level 3 qualifications to 'game' the admissions process, in light of the widening participation expectations that are placed on institutions.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless the continued political and wider societal interest in who goes to higher education, and where and what they study, means that direct (and in some cases proxy) indicators of the social and educational backgrounds of applicants for first degrees are highly likely to continue to be collected and monitored.

This long-term interest in equity within education for undergraduates is now gradually expanding to cover graduate students pursuing both taught and research degrees. There is however little or no overarching policy directing universities to focus on specific indicators that they might use to monitor

progress, and therefore no sector-wide collection of data on the entry profiles or comparative completion rates of graduate students.

Notwithstanding this particular 'gap' in the data that institutions are obliged to return to HESA, a substantial amount of data about the operation of members of the sector is collected and published annually. This can provide the basis for informed insights into aspects of higher education across the UK, but when considering teaching may also need to be viewed in the context of external factors such as demographic shifts or global economic downturns to appreciate the full picture.

## **Research**

Successive periodic national research assessment exercises (known since 2014 as the Research Excellence Framework, which evolved from earlier approaches) and government-commissioned reports on the UK research base since 2011 have claimed that the UK 'punches above its weight' versus international comparators.<sup>17</sup> With a relatively small workforce and modest Research and Development (R&D) budget, the knowledge created within the higher education sector does indeed have an outsized impact on the world stage in terms of output, influence and collaboration.

The table shows peer-reviewed publications including at least one UK-based author (most of which are based in higher education institutions) have more than doubled since 2002. Yet owing in large part to the rise of Chinese contributors to the English-language literature, the UK's share of global knowledge production has in fact declined over this period.

To understand the influence that this research has on other researchers, we consider Field-Weighted Citation Impact (FWCI), an indicator that accounts for variations in the frequency and timing of referencing behaviours of different fields of research. This indicator stood at a very high level in 2022 relative to the global baseline (1.53 vs 1.00) and has increased since 2002 despite the underlying growth in the sheer volume of publications it represents. The sense of growth in quality over and above the growth in output is reinforced by the UK's share of the top-cited 10% of world publications rising from 15.8% two decades ago to 17.6% today.

*Publication-based indicators of research output, influence and collaboration<sup>18</sup>*

	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Country/Region</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>Percent change</b>
<b>Output</b>	Publications	UK	96,592	218,634	126%
		World	1,337,383	3,711,381	178%
		UK share of World	7.2%	5.9%	-18%
<b>Influence</b>	Field-Weighted Citation Impact	UK	1.45	1.53	6%
	Proportion of publications in Top 10% cited publications	UK	15.8%	17.6%	11%
<b>Collaboration</b>	Proportion of publications representing international collaboration	UK	29.8%	63.0%	111%
		World	12.1%	22.2%	83%
	Proportion of publications representing academic-corporate collaboration	UK	4.2%	5.6%	33%
		World	2.7%	2.7%	0%

It is important to recognise that research is a team sport, and that publications often reflect the contributions of multiple researchers based in different countries and in organisations other than universities. During the last 20 years, the UK has become an increasingly connected player in the global research system. In 2022, less than 30% of research with at least one UK-based author included at least one other author from another country; by 2022, this figure has more than doubled to 63% and far outstripped the world baseline of 22%. In the same period, UK publications reflecting academic-industry co-authorship – a sign of collaboration and innovation potential – has also increased significantly and is more than twice the global rate.

Thus, despite broader political moves to the contrary, these data clearly demonstrate that the UK higher education sector remains a significant member of the international research community and continues to build influential links and collaborations.

## Notes

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- 8 Source: HESA

- 9 The pattern of these cross-subsidies is discussed in more detail in Nick Hillman, *From T to R revisited: Cross-subsidies from teaching to research after Augar and the 2.4% R&D target*, HEPI Report 127, March 2020 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/09/from-t-to-r-revisited-cross-subsidies-from-teaching-to-research-after-auغار-and-the-2-4-rd-target/>; also see Universities UK, ‘Higher education in facts and figures: 2021’ at <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/higher-education-facts-and-figures-2021#finances>

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### **3. What happened to the masterplan? The relationship between government and higher education**

**Chris Millward**

There was certainly a plan. Some said it was scrawled on the back of a beer mat or a cigarette packet. It was more likely to have figured on a blackboard in Sanctuary Buildings, though that could have been in words, a chart or a formula. A public version of it – the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* – was published in January 2003 and led to the Higher Education Act (2004).<sup>1</sup> Neither of these, though, captured the real plan being discussed around the kitchens of Northavon House and Polaris House, which was a sector modelled on the best state higher education systems in the USA.<sup>2</sup>

#### **A masterplan for English higher education**

Every region would have a flagship research university, to be achieved through mergers. Other universities would focus on applied research and professionally-oriented teaching, developing 'third stream' engagement as their first mission. Through joint ventures and college networks, universities would open in counties and towns without provision. There would be new medical schools and Foundation Degree qualifications designed around the needs of employers across the country. The government would support universities to recruit an extra 50,000 international students by 2005.

The Government could broker this through the Secretary of State for Education's relationships with the most influential

higher education leaders. The Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) had served as a vice-chancellor, President of Universities UK and Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council. When he left HEFCE in 2006 for a further vice-chancellor position, he was replaced by another vice-chancellor who had served with the Research Councils.<sup>3</sup> By that time, the senior civil servant responsible for higher education was also a former vice-chancellor. Due to the Labour Party's control of the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, as well as central government in Westminster, and the commonality of approaches between the English, Welsh and Scottish Funding Councils, there could be a coherent policy UK-wide.

The new configuration of universities and colleges would improve access to and pathways through higher education, creating the vision of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, of a knowledge economy 'open and genuinely based on merit and the equal worth of all'.<sup>4</sup> Increasing public spending could be justified by the promise of returns to the Exchequer from graduates and research driving productivity through businesses and public services.

This plan would though, in practice, need investment and mechanisms for delivery. The Prime Minister would provide political support for an increased tuition fee cap for domestic undergraduates of £3,000. Through the 2002 Spending Review, the Treasury would increase HEFCE funding from £5.1 to £6.3 billion and overall research funding from £1.9 to £2.6 billion between 2002/03 and 2005/06.<sup>5</sup> HEFCE's funding, allocated to 289 universities and colleges in 2003/04, would mostly be distributed as block grant, but through strategic development funding and additional student numbers, its Regional

Consultants and their counterparts in Regional Development Agencies could align national priorities with local needs.<sup>6</sup> This would leverage university borrowing, further education capital, land from local authorities and NHS placements and facilities.

The accountability relationship between government and universities would become known from 2005 as a 'single conversation', through which the annual guidance from government and grants to institutions, underpinned by a Financial Memorandum, were intended to provide assurance on all aspects of public investment.<sup>7</sup>

### **Fragmentation of policy in practice**

In 2023, the relationship between government and higher education is neither 'single' nor a 'conversation'. Oversight of education and research is split between the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). The Office for Students (OfS) serves the interests of tuition-fee paying consumers as the regulator of around 410 English higher education providers.<sup>8</sup>

Research continues to be substantially funded by government grants, with the largest sums allocated by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), but it relies on institutional investment to maintain global standing, which is largely derived from international student recruitment. The current Conservative Government oversees most research funding across the UK and the regulation of higher education in England, but different approaches are deployed for funding and accountability by the Scottish National Party in Scotland and the Labour Party in Wales.

UKRI and its constituent Research Councils continue to be led by senior researchers with connections across their subject areas. The Office for Students has a more distant relationship, applying the same conditions to universities, further education colleges and for-profit providers. Its duties and functions, set out in the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA), consider neither the needs of different places nor the coherence of provision, creating instead the conditions for student choice and provider competition.<sup>9</sup>

The OfS Board is chaired by a peer and former MP who follows the Government whip, and it contains more lawyers and school teachers than academic staff and students. Quality regulation is delivered by the OfS itself, rather than through the sector-owned Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Whereas HEFCE received an annual grant letter, the Government issued 24 guidance letters to the OfS between its formation in 2018 and 2022.<sup>10</sup> These letters set expectations for regulation and funding, but also pose challenges to higher education providers on their culture, standards and outcomes.

There can be tensions between the regulatory, funding and planning approaches deployed by different parts of government. It is difficult, for example, to align the allocation of research and postgraduate funding by UKRI, and the planning of services and placements by NHS Trusts, with the supply of graduates based on choice and competition. This can hamper the delivery of policies to increase research and innovation across the regions, and to meet NHS workforce demand.<sup>11</sup>

The level and complexity of consultation and evidence required for regulatory activity, which imposes obligations, is greater than is needed for funding, which provides conditional

support. As a result, reforms to quality and free speech regulation, which have been promoted through guidance and legislative change since the current Government's election in 2019, remain in progress in 2023.<sup>12</sup>

In February 2018, the Prime Minister announced the Augar review of post-18 education, with a similar aim as the Labour Government 15 years earlier: 'to connect everyone to a sense of fairness and opportunity'.<sup>13</sup> The review reported in May 2019, but the Government was unable to agree its response until February 2022. This was a policy statement rather than a White Paper detailing the reforms throughout tertiary education advocated by the review group.<sup>14</sup> During the four years between commissioning and response, there were two Prime Ministers, three Secretaries of State and four Ministers. By 2023, responsibility for implementing the response had passed through three Prime Ministers, five Secretaries of State and three Ministers.

## **Towards a new settlement**

There are many legacies of the Government's plan for higher education in 2023. They include: a single flagship research university in Manchester; universities in Suffolk, Cumbria and Cornwall; medical schools in Plymouth, Brighton and Hull; and higher education centres in Burnley, Blackburn and Oldham. There is a national survey capturing the experiences of over 300,000 students each year, an embedded source of data and funding for civic and commercial knowledge exchange, and an established Research Council for the arts and humanities.<sup>15</sup> The former Labour government's target for 50% of the young population to participate in higher education was achieved in 2017/18 and international student numbers have increased well beyond its ambitions.

In 2003, there were 86,000 academic staff and 1.98 million students in English higher education, supported by income of £14 billion, of which 25% was gained from tuition fees.<sup>16</sup> By 2021, income levels had increased to £37 billion, 56% from tuition fees, and this supported 194,000 academic staff and 2.43 million students.<sup>17</sup> Universities have a greater footprint than ever before, both directly through the people studying and working in them and the expansion of their estates, but also indirectly through their influence on jobs, migration and investment and the expectations and values of young people.

The pattern of expansion has not, however, followed the 2003 plan. HEFCE could neither force mergers on autonomous universities nor require them to offer specific types of provision in particular places. While securing funding for local collaborations and focussed missions, universities developed their own strategies to meet the diversity of demand for their education, research and services locally, nationally and internationally.

The Government's ability to plan higher education diminished further following the 2007 banking crash and the coming to power of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition committed to deficit reduction from 2010. That new government increased the domestic undergraduate tuition fee cap to £9,000 from 2012, facilitated by the replacement of £3 billion in teaching grant with repayable loans. This implemented advice in the Browne review, which had been established by the Labour Government, that graduates should make a greater contribution to the cost of higher education.<sup>18</sup>

The Coalition Government did not, though, follow the review's recommendation that it should legislate for a single body responsible for the Government's investment in higher education through student finance, teaching grants and research funding. Through the 2011 *Students at the Heart of the System* White Paper, it positioned choice and competition as the drivers of higher education provision.<sup>19</sup> This, coupled with the removal of student number controls and guidance in 2015 from the Competition and Markets Authority, set the pattern for structural changes introduced by HERA to be approved by a Parliament with a Conservative Party majority following the 2015 General Election.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, the relationship between the Government and higher education appeared to reflect the balance of public and private interests. Through repayable loans, some of which would be written-off, the Government shared with graduates the cost of their education. OfS regulation would provide baseline levels of assurance on issues of shared concern to students and taxpayers. Research continued to be financed largely by the Government, so it would be shaped by UKRI as a strategic funding agency that would enhance coherence across the Research Councils and stimulate private investment.

This settlement changed in 2018 with the decision of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that the predicted student loan write-offs should feature in the public spending figures.<sup>21</sup> The new situation was also, however, influenced by the public character of higher education beyond the level of spending, which yields intervention even by governments committed to market forces.

This was clear from the arguments within successive governments about constraining visas for international staff and students, and the extent to which the Government determined the delivery of higher education during the Coronavirus pandemic. It was also exemplified by the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum, which reflected the uneven distribution of the benefits among people and communities of the pursuit of a knowledge economy, based on higher education expansion and open labour markets.<sup>22</sup>

The demand-led expansion of English higher education has been characterised by consolidation and concentration around full-time full-degree studies. This contrasts with the 2003 plan for mission differentiation, through which universities would move out to communities and employers across the country, rather than bringing students to their own campuses. The proportion of students entering part-time and above the age of 21 reduced from 34% to 12% between 2008/09 and 2019/20, and the proportion entering part-time for a qualification below a full degree from 23% to 4%.<sup>23</sup>

Further education colleges, which are more likely to be based in post-industrial and coastal towns where there are low levels of higher education participation, experienced larger cuts to funding than other areas of education during the period of deficit reduction from 2010.<sup>24</sup> Places with universities and high-levels of higher education participation not only improved opportunities for their local populations, they also attracted people and investment from other areas. This led to a concentration of wages and highly skilled jobs across the country, and the polarisation between graduates and non-graduates was apparent in the Brexit vote and after.<sup>25</sup>



These patterns, coupled with stalling productivity growth and tuition fee expenditure rising beyond £10 billion, have increased the Government's appetite for intervention.<sup>26</sup> But it has weak levers due to the separation of its oversight between different aspects of higher education and its reliance on student demand and fee income to shape the pattern of provision.

In 2023, our system is too large, plural and public to be planned by vice-chancellors or controlled by regulation. We can, though, work towards a better relationship between the government and higher education, more joined-up engagement across institutions' education, research and civic missions and ultimately more common goals.

## Notes

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## **4. The evolving tertiary space in the UK: Meeting the skills needs through HE in FE**

**Andrea Laczik and Josh Patel**

The university sector in the UK is, despite its status in popular and political discourse, only one part of a much broader spectrum of post-secondary education. This spectrum of tertiary education and training also includes further education (FE) colleges and other higher education institutions (HEIs). Neither has the nature of higher education remained static; its aims and size have changed significantly over time, and there is of course significant variation between individual institutions and between the regulatory frameworks of the four nations of the UK.

In this complex environment, the concept of the tertiary sector can enable a holistic approach to education and training, and help align individual actors to support common societal, economic and policy goals. There are positive indications that, across the UK, systematic initiatives are underway to move towards such an approach. Examples of good practice occur at regional and local level across the four nations. However, these efforts face significant challenges and there is scope for further development of a holistic tertiary approach.

### **Higher education in context**

The UK certainly possesses a growing and diverse 'mass' higher education system, as defined by Martin Trow, representing a substantial portion of a tertiary sector with participation rates at least at 40%.<sup>1</sup> From 2000 to 2022, higher education student numbers increased from 1.81 million to 2.86 million and applications to enter higher education institutions reached record highs.

Historically, universities were attended by future leaders of society while FE colleges offered provision needed for the labour market. FE and HE have thus been perceived as applying different approaches to education, targeting different student groups, and the qualifications awarded by different institutions were viewed as preparation for different social roles. This led to a perceived hierarchy between the two sectors. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) in England reinforced the separation of FE and HE and created the two distinct sectors with separate funding streams.<sup>2</sup> According to Gareth Parry this structure underpinned the assumption that FE and HE:

*stood for different levels of learning and, for this main reason, should be provided by separate types of organisation ... and, without serious challenge then or since, it has become part of the taken-for-granted world of further and higher education.*<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, the overlap between FE and HE provision, in particular undergraduate provision, has been overlooked, perhaps because this method of delivery of higher education is still not regarded as normal or necessary. Furthermore, the relative newness of HE in FE and its perceived status mean that it attracts little interest in terms of research and evaluation.

Nevertheless, some detail of the scale of this provision is available across the four nations from HESA.<sup>4</sup> In England, one-in-three of those aged 19 years and under studying a higher education course are doing so at an FE college. In 2022/23, there are 110,000 people studying undergraduate and postgraduate courses at 153 colleges registered by the Office for Students (OfS) to offer HE courses.<sup>5</sup> In Scotland, both full-time and part-time student numbers in FE have increased, by

6.8% and 9.4% respectively, due to the increase in provision of HNCs and HNDs.<sup>6</sup> In Wales in 2019/20 there were 6,935 enrolments in HE in FE courses. In Northern Ireland, the six regional colleges were delivering about 20% of HE provision in the form of higher vocational programmes and foundation degrees.<sup>7</sup>

HE has also converged with FE as institutions bring new emphasis to their engagement with employers and local communities, and initiatives have been introduced to expand work-related higher education and training – particularly through the introduction of, for example, Degree Apprenticeships in England and Graduate Apprenticeships in Scotland.

### **Responding to common challenges but going different ways**

The UK currently faces pressing challenges arising from the continuing fallout of the pandemic and Brexit, the ramifications of climate change, digitalisation and automation and the increasing demand for highly qualified skilled labour to secure regional and national economic growth and international competitiveness. Skills shortages across the economies highlight a growing need for accessible higher vocational provisions to meet these national requirements.

The response to these challenges and other local concerns by FE and higher education institutions varies across the four parts of the UK. The devolution of powers after 1998 from Westminster to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly of Wales has led to differences to varying extents between each nation's further

and higher education systems. In effect, this has created a UK policy 'laboratory' where the different mix of social partners and specific national contexts means unique approaches to common challenges can arise. This provides a ready-made context for policy learning across the four nations, an approach that is superior to policy borrowing as it retains an awareness of the context of a policy in its national educational, political, economic and social environments.

There is a clear interest and rhetoric in supporting a single, coherent and complementary tertiary education across all four nations in the UK as they share much history and face similar social, economic and global challenges. There is, however, a fundamental difference from the outset: while England's approach to education and training is based on marketisation, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales take a more system-based approach. The Further Education Trust for Leadership argues:

*Even in countries where a systems-based approach is dominant, such as Scotland, institutions are sometimes competing for scarce funding, students and prestige. In other words, inside systems there is often an element of contestability and competition.<sup>8</sup>*

Funding is one key driving force enabling or prohibiting the development of partnerships between colleges and universities across the UK. Each specific funding arrangement – direct, indirect or consortia – makes its specific mark on FE and HE collaboration. Wales, for example, has decided to pursue a franchise route, meaning 'the HEI retains responsibility for student numbers, the curriculum, the quality of the provision and the student experience.'<sup>9</sup> In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy manages the funding of



education. In England, FE colleges are funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and higher education institutions by the Office for Students, keeping the two sectors' funding streams unhelpfully separate. In practice, the devolved nations' funding choices may heighten unproductive competition within and between the FE and HE sectors.<sup>10</sup>

## **Meeting the needs of economy through collaboration**

There is a UK-wide ambition to ensure the economic and social wellbeing of people by improving their skills. Evidence from the devolved nations suggests collaboration between higher education institutions and FE can contribute to efforts to meet the skills demands of the labour market. The provision of FE colleges, as anchor institutions in their local communities, links closely with local and regional skills needs and contributes to economic impact. In a holistic tertiary sector this can be beneficial, financially and otherwise, for HE and FE, and for the student, who could complete two of the three years of a degree course locally and attend university for their final year to obtain a degree. This would mean rationalising available resources. In 2015, the *Review of higher education in further education institutions in Wales* found that FE colleges that deliver mostly vocational courses can support and help meet the needs of specific higher skills that local and regional employers need.<sup>11</sup> Through their vocational courses and their close links with employers, employability is a natural outcome. Further, HE in FE attracts participation from local communities and from underserved and disadvantaged groups that otherwise would not engage with HE studies. Colleges' ability to deliver intermediate and higher courses flexibly and locally contributes to widening access to higher education, and inspires learners to continue with their education.

The Welsh Government, concerned with rationalising a complex and fragmentary post-secondary education landscape, has established the legal framework for a broad holistic approach through the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act (2022). This is considered the most significant framework for tertiary education – including FE, HE and post-16 education and training – in the UK since devolution. While the Act provides the framework, details are currently being finalised and the Commission for the Tertiary Education and Research will soon become fully operational.

The Scottish Government is pursuing a strategy of strengthening networks through Enterprise and Skills Strategic boards, bringing together government agencies with colleges, universities and employers to strengthen links between tertiary education and economic development in policy and delivery. Consequently, colleges operate in an increasingly coherent strategic policy environment which includes, for example, 'Articulation Agreements' enabling students with prior further education qualifications to enter degree studies at later stages. Guidelines for local and regional Articulation Agreements are developed by Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland through the National Articulation Forum:

*At their best, these show local leaders taking responsibility to develop joined-up pathways that support people to access education and training opportunities that may otherwise be out of reach.<sup>12</sup>*

In Northern Ireland, colleges have gone through a process of rationalisation and emerged as six regional colleges. FE colleges, universities and other HEIs regularly meet at the Tertiary Education Sector Leaders Forum. FE programmes

directly link to national, regional and local skills needs. Northern Ireland has pioneered a unique model of collaboration across the six regional colleges called Curriculum Hubs. Each college takes the lead for certain priority and growth sector areas, such as Digital IT, Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing or Construction. The lead college is tasked with developing high-quality provision with labour market value using collective experience and expertise from across the six colleges. The Curriculum Hub is built on collaboration between colleges, HEIs and employers to benefit both learners and employers and to support lifelong learning.

In contrast, England has a complex and disjointed education and skills system in flux that operates in a quasi-market. The separation of HE and FE funding and the consistent underfunding of FE colleges do not offer a good basis for HE and FE collaboration. In England, putting employers at the heart of the system has been central. The employer-led Institutes of Technology (IoT), following a new model to deliver skills, were announced in 2019 and may serve as an example which is based on strategic collaboration between FE, HE and employers. Their aim is, for example, to deliver world-class technical education and training, fill skills gaps in their specialisms and support adult learners who look for flexible access to HE. While there are examples of good practices, such as the London City IoT and Lincolnshire IoT, systematic evaluation of the Institutes of Technology is necessary to identify the strength and weaknesses of this new model.<sup>13</sup> In general, more needs to be done to achieve a system-wide tertiary sector.

## **Concluding remarks**

The separation of FE and HE looked as firmly entrenched as ever 20 years ago. Even though the 'binary divide' between HE and advanced FE was breached with the redesignation of the polytechnics as universities in 1992, and devolution opened-up the possibility of divergent HE and FE policy strategies, the university sector remained highly stratified and detached from the rest of tertiary education. The recent and rapid progress towards improving coordination is powered by the recognition that addressing national social and economic priorities requires the effective utilisation and coordination of the strengths of both FE and HE.

There is increasingly constructive discussion about the need to develop a holistic, agile and embedded tertiary system in each of the devolved nations, founded on a shared agreement that higher skills are the key to economic growth and international competitiveness. The principles that support the further development of such a collaborative system are the same for each place: for example, clear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders; collaboration rather than competition; and taking a systematic approach to plan tertiary education and skills provision. However, the extent to which these have been achieved by each nation differs starkly.

Today, the four parts of the UK all demonstrate slow but considerable progress in achieving their own distinct 'tertiary visions'. The specificities of approaches of the devolved nations, with their many common grounds, offer an expansive platform for learning in the UK's policy laboratory that can support further progress of the individual nations.

There is considerable scope for further development in all parts of the UK and significant questions remain as to what shape a tertiary sector might take and how it might operate. The scale of local, national and international challenges seems unlikely to abate over the next 20 years. If the four nations are to best prepare their citizens to help tackle these complex and multifaceted challenges, transferability of people and increased coordination at a tertiary level will be a key asset.

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## **5. University governance reformed: The transformation of a 'self-governed' to a 'regulated' university system**

**Michael Shattock**

The year 2003 can be seen as starting point in a process of systemic governance change in UK higher education. Universities were emerging from two decades of government-led austerity. The Dearing report had prompted the introduction of student tuition fees of £1,000 per annum in 1998, but by 2003 further reductions in recurrent grant had neutralised their impact on institutional budgets and a government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, recommended an increase to a maximum tuition fee of £3,000.<sup>1</sup> The White Paper also stated that the new regime would enable 'each institution to choose the mission and the funding streams necessary to support it'. It envisaged a market where 'the best universities' would charge up to the maximum but others would adapt their fee levels to their individual aspirations or their perceived market.

In 2010, following the Browne review, a full cost tuition fee replaced a government grant altogether, except for top-ups in some STEM subjects and Medicine, and the cap on institutional student number targets was later withdrawn, allowing individual institutions to expand at will.<sup>2</sup> A full-blown market had thus been created. The 2011 White Paper describing the philosophical *raison d'être* of the new system emphasised the value of competition between institutions and the incentive it gave to improving quality.<sup>3</sup> A civil servant conceded that the new funding market owed a great deal to the funding mechanisms created for regulated industries like the utilities.<sup>4</sup>

## **Institutional governance in a marketised system**

The pre-1992 universities' response to these moves reflected a culture, and governance structures that had been formed around recurrent grants based on fixed student number targets. Universities had always competed with one another for highly qualified staff and students, although the introduction of differentiated Quality Research (QR) funding since the mid-1980s had sharpened the outcomes of internal resource allocation considerably. Nevertheless, the internal governing arrangements had remained largely unchanged.

The Dearing report of 1997 had recommended a reduction in governing body membership to 24 and a strengthening of the governing body's strategic role but the essential climate of university governance, particularly in the pre-1992 foundations, still lingered on the cusp of change in 2003.<sup>5</sup> The introduction of full tuition fee marketisation was to transform the context of university governance in these universities and create a new set of hierarchies and management layers which have had profound impacts on the practice of their governance. The impacts were much less in the post-1992 foundations because, in their past polytechnic history, their funding had mostly depended on open-ended access.

Marketisation brought governing bodies much more into play. The lay members of governing bodies, largely drawn from people with financial, legal or industrial backgrounds, were supposedly much more experienced in strategies applicable in markets than academic communities. They could contribute little to discussions about research strategy or tactics for addressing research assessment, even though it was of such importance to the bottom line, but now it appeared they



had a significant stake in influencing strategy. This very much accorded with pressures from government for a business model where governing bodies acted more like company boards and vice-chancellors like chief executives. (The analogy did not, of course, hold because lay members were non-executives).

In these circumstances, the former polytechnic model of a unicameral governance structure of a board of governors containing only minimal academic representation (in contrast with the pre-1992 universities where the ratio of academic to lay members was roughly one-third) and where the vice-chancellor, as a formally-defined chief executive advised the board unconstrained (legally at least) by an academic board, seemed more appropriate to the times. This structure contrasted with the greater role of the academic community in the pre-1992 universities, where a bicameral constitution provided shared governance with an academic senate that elected the academic members onto the governing body and that could impose constraints on the actions of vice-chancellors.

Increasingly, the marketisation process has brought the day-to-day practice of institutional governance of pre- and post-1992 universities together: governing bodies operate less as a critical friend and much more as monitors of institutional performance, occasionally crossing the line between governance and management; boards have become smaller and the proportion of lay to academic members has significantly increased; vice-chancellors are viewed less as academic leaders and more as chief executives; and senates have been overtaken by weekly meetings of vice-chancellors' executive committees, essentially senior management teams,

which report directly through the vice-chancellor to the governing body.

## **The growing regulatory environment**

This transition has been reinforced in England by government influence through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and then the Office for Students (OfS). When constructing the regulations to define the powers of the OfS, it was not the universities that were consulted but the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Prudential Regulations Authority of the Bank of England. The OfS was, in the Minister's words, to be 'a classic market regulator'.<sup>6</sup>

Not content with measuring institutional academic performance through the heavyweight exercises of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the latter offering as competitive incentives Gold, Silver and Bronze ratings, the OfS also required an interlocking set of financial statements, a value-for-money report, an annual sustainability assessment, a Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) report and an updated five-year financial forecast, all of which required the active approval of the governing body. In 2017, HEFCE added to this by demanding an Annual Quality Assurance Statement which required governing body assurance in the following terms:

*The governing body has received and discussed a report and accompanying action plan relating to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes.*

and:

*That standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.*<sup>7</sup>

These requirements, in addition to creating bureaucratic overload, extended the role of governing bodies – particularly in the latter instance – where they clearly threatened to cross the line separating lay governance from professional academic responsibilities. In some universities, this prompted governing body members to seek attendance at academic boards to satisfy themselves about the exercise of quality assurance procedures.<sup>8</sup> The burdens on lay governors raised questions as to whether they should be paid honoraria for their services and the combined impact of these changes has led to concern over the ‘laicisation’ of university.<sup>9</sup>

### **The impact on internal self-governance**

Changes at the top of universities’ governance structures are paralleled below. The sheer size and complexity of running the modern university has led to the growth of powerful vice-chancellors’ executive committees at the expense of the powers of the larger and less business-like senates. This has had an important impact in reducing the participation of the academic community in the formulation of policy and in decision-taking: academic policy becomes more clearly separate from financial and managerial decision-making.

The days when a university senate, as at the University of Warwick, would vote down a plan to open an overseas campus already approved by its governing body are almost certainly long gone.<sup>10</sup> This is reinforced by the almost universal practice of appointing academic officers – provosts, pro-vice-

chancellors and deans – from outside the institution instead of either by internal consultation or by election from within. These external appointees, usually given defined briefs, are answerable to the vice-chancellor who appointed them rather than to organs of the academic community and become key members of the vice-chancellors' executive committees. They generally do not engage, or at least not very much, in teaching and their roles are interpreted by academics as managerial.

Decision-making becomes more top down, organisational culture becomes more explicitly managerial, internal academic reorganisations become more arbitrary, senior academics become increasingly reluctant to take on departmental headships, student recruitment markets determine academic policy and marketing departments come to play a role in curricula and student selection.

During this time, one of the most obvious signs of success for the university system has been the growth of the international student body. Here the concept of a market was created unwittingly by the decision of the government in 1980 to abandon the provision of subsidised tuition to international students. Universities that were later critical of the impact of marketisation on the home student market showed no compunction in entering a high-fee international student market. By 2003, the supporting operations had been professionalised, contracts with overseas marketing and recruitment companies signed and the income generated had produced welcome surpluses. But the downside was the danger, especially in the greatly expanded institutions of the 2020s, that students – both home and international – became viewed as commodities and that consumerism became endemic in relations between the student body and the institutions.

In terms of governance, this has not emerged and relations between student representative bodies and universities – with regular meetings with senior university officers and membership of governing bodies, senates / academic boards, faculties and department / school meetings – have remained stable. Nevertheless, the instability inherent in a tuition fee driven university budget has put an increased emphasis on finance at all levels: critics argue that the ‘financialisation’ of university decision-making is dominating consideration of academic priorities in teaching and research.

The effect of these changes has been to weaken the cohesiveness of institutions: relations between vice-chancellors and their governing bodies have become less comfortable, as have their relations with university staff in the light of their revealed salary levels. Questions have been asked about the role of governing bodies in this.

Tensions exist over both operational and strategic issues between unelected executive committees and senates / academic boards while at faculty levels externally appointed pro-vice-chancellors and unelected deans hand down decisions from above. A feeling of alienation can be found among academic staff and a loss of a sense of belonging: universities have become managed bureaucracies, not primarily places of teaching and learning. In particular the emphasis on bureaucratically-applied accountability at all levels, both academic and financial, throughout the system discourages creativity at academic and institutional levels and a reluctance to innovate, unless toward income generation.

## **Institutional governance across devolved systems**

A prime contributor to this regime in England is the added bureaucracy associated with the Office for Students, stimulated in great part by pressures from government itself. Conceived ideologically as a regulator of a marketised higher education system, it has proved invasive and egregiously bureaucratic in its demands on institutions. Heavily regulated itself, largely to accommodate an ideological push towards an extensive expansion of private provision, which has not in fact taken place, its tone was set by its first chair who announced that the Office would not intervene to 'prop up' institutions subject to market failure.<sup>11</sup> It has not yet had to implement this approach but its overload of interventions and data requirements have done much to alter the climate in which institutional governance is carried out.

The OfS, however, is an English device and its remit, though influential, does not extend to the 29 of the 163 UK universities located in the devolved nations. More user-friendly 1992-style Funding Councils were initially retained both in Wales and in Scotland, with Wales deciding latterly to convert to a Tertiary Education Commission. In both nations the smaller size of the university systems encourages much more intimate and, in the case of Wales, more consensual governance relations with their countries' governments.

In Scotland, which in 2000 refused to join with the rest of the UK in charging tuition fees, relations have been more robust between Universities Scotland and the SNP Government, including the imposition of legislation to make the chairs of university governing bodies elective positions and to add trades unions and further student representation to the

membership – provisions that ran entirely counter to the underlying instincts of government in England. In Northern Ireland, the lack of a power-sharing administration has frozen political advance and left open the decision on the 2010 tuition fee levels introduced in England and substantively in Wales.

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that in Northern Ireland, as in Wales and Scotland, institutional governance is conducted on a more collegial basis than in England and universities may be more agreeable places in which to work and study. In England, an increasingly entrenched system of control is at variance with calls for innovation in teaching and research, the core business of the institutions.

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## **6. The perennial challenge of funding undergraduate higher education**

**Mark Corver**

Since HEPI began its work 20 years ago, it has examined many important changes and challenges. Perhaps the most consequential of these is the simplest: how to pay for the high costs of good quality undergraduate study for the growing numbers of young UK students who aspire to go to university.

Two broad approaches have been in use in this period. First, governments providing the teaching costs by grant, but setting a permitted number of students to control their costs. Once universal, this is now only seen reflected in the systems of Northern Ireland and Scotland. In these models both the numbers and funding-per-student tend to be shaped by competition from other pressing areas of public expenditure, rather than the level of demand or need.

The other approach is where the student pays the full cost and universities are allowed to grow to accommodate demand if they wish. This is broadly the system in England (and similar in Wales), with the introduction in 2012 of higher fees, paid by students via a loan, going hand-in-hand with the greater opportunity and choice resulting from making recruitment uncapped.

This was a bold experiment that can record two significant successes. The chances of an 18-year old in England going to university have increased by 40% between 2012 and 2021. And for those living in under-represented neighbourhoods, the chances of going to university grew by over two-thirds

over that period, driving a reduction in the relative chances of going to university between neighbourhoods.

### **How this funding crisis has arrived**

However, in 2023 the fee and uncapped numbers system is in crisis. Underlying this has been an increase in tension between politicians and universities. Although this has many manifestations, the cause is disquiet over university funding. Crudely, universities are seen as taking money for teaching upfront, leaving the risk for poor outcomes with government and taxpayers. The eventual anticipated shortfall in repayments, recorded as a cost to government when the loans are made, has been variable but in recent years hovered around 50%. With over £20 billion a year being loaned for full-time higher education alone, the outstanding debt is around £200 billion in 2021/22. This is already in the same territory as the debt-covered costs of the pandemic and, with outstanding loans expected to grow to around £500 billion (in 2021/22 money) in a couple of decades, there is no clear end in sight.

As the expense climbs, governments increasingly perceive they are spending a lot of money on higher education with little in return. They worry they do not get the responsiveness to policy directions they feel they have paid for, nor the competitive market mechanisms (like differential fees) they hoped would achieve the same. Worse, politicians have found their spending on the costly subsidy through the design of the loan is invisible to students, who believe they are already paying far too much for far too long. The language of debt and interest, seeing balances increasing despite repayments and repayments stretching for decade after decade is not a happy

mix, generating more resentment than thanks. The product of all of this is that governments have become disinclined to help universities, with increasing the tuition fee seen as political self-destruction.

Within this setting, anything that generated a need for government to help with funding could cause a crisis. Very high inflation has been the trigger. It has interacted with the fixed tuition fee to push the economics of teaching UK students into crisis territory at alarming speed. The real unit of resource has fallen from £9,000 in 2012 to £6,060 in April 2023. Universities have now lost the equivalent of around £3 billion from their annual income for teaching from the inflation effects of just the 18-months from August 2021. It is a genuine crisis.

### **Universities do not have any good responses**

One response for universities is to wait it out and hope things get better. But this is unlikely to work. Even if inflation were to fall to zero tomorrow and stay there, the funding damage has already been done – and the chances of inflation falling promptly to zero are not encouraging. Historical data for similar trajectories on inflation as it is now do show paths to lower inflation over a year or so. But one was 70 years ago, and a more recent comparator period in the early 1990s came with real interest rates over 10 points higher than today. Universities with debt coming up to refinance might find that a solution is somewhat worse than the problem. From the current starting point, lower, similar or even higher inflation all have historical precedent. Either way with no reason to expect government rescue, universities are forced to act now for the possibility that already depleted real fee levels will likely get worse.

The obvious tactical response is the progressive swapping of the fee-capped undergraduate UK students for higher fee students. In a capacity limited system, it must have an element of swapping, since the proportion of UK students must fall to maintain the average real unit of resource. This response intensified in 2022 with unprecedented cuts in UK undergraduate recruitment at highly selective universities while international entrants continued to grow. This pushed the UK 18-year old entry rate down even as the application rate was increasing, putting the sector in the uncharted territory of having instigated the first supply-led recession in young entry on record. The initial response of future students to this restriction of opportunity may be diminishing appetite for higher education with the largest ever fall, around two percentage points, in the application rate for UK 18-year olds in January 2023.

The response to these kinds of patterns is too often to highlight that higher fee students subsidise UK students. This is arithmetically correct, but this does not necessarily make it an acceptable response for those who lose out. Around a quarter of degree places at selective universities now go to higher fee international students. Would reserving a quarter of hospital capacity for fee-paying overseas patients to help subsidise the remainder of beds be seen as a funding strategy that would command public support? If not, should a similar subsidy argument be made so readily for university places?

There must also be a risk to the high public standing of universities if a perception takes hold that UK students are increasingly being denied places in favour of international students. Not on academic merit but simply for money. The danger is perhaps greatest around whether they are seen to be playing their role in society around widening participation. As

recently as 2016, English Russell Group universities used more or less equal numbers of their entry places for UK students from under-represented (POLAR Q1 and Q2) backgrounds as they did for higher fee international students. By 2022, far more places were being used for higher fee students than those from under-represented UK backgrounds, exacerbated by a sharp fall in those UK students while the intake of higher fee students grew slightly.

Beyond how thwarted applicants might see this response, it also makes for questionable wider strategy. Universities create highly skilled economically competitive workforces. It is why ambitious countries usually seek to increase higher education levels. It is odd then to have a situation where government heavily incentivises the most sought-after universities to prioritise their capacity to equip the workforce of economic competitors over the domestic economy.

Furthermore, many universities do not have enough higher fee students, or enough of a fee differential, for this to be a viable strategy. They only have the third response, trying to reduce in real terms the money spent on teaching students. If successful, a different sort of university experience would inevitably result from this. Cheaper to provide and, minus some miracle (two-year degrees?), of lower quality as a result. Students would likely be less satisfied with their experience, and the utility of graduates to the economy diminished. Ultimately reduced funding would show up in statistics like staff:student ratios, acting to push UK universities down international rankings, gradually surrendering the national differentiator here. And even this uninviting future relies on the questionable assumption that there would be continuing strong domestic demand for what might well be viewed as an under-funded second-rate experience.

## **Is there space for a new model?**

With none of the responses available to universities really working, what is needed if we are to celebrate HEPI's fortieth anniversary with a higher education system that is still recognisable in its role as champion of domestic aspirations and respected global quality? Minor changes to the planned permutations of repayment thresholds, fees and interest seem unlikely to be the answer.

Going to university is now at such a scale that it is far too important to both young people and the economic health of the country not to address this. Some of the problems with the existing system are accidental or unanticipated, which does give a bit of headroom to a better solution. Good higher education is costly, and it needs to be paid for. Some bold changes are needed to secure higher education for the future and students, universities and government would all need to be ready to tolerate some losses relative to circumstances now to get to a better solution overall. With the existing system now deep in crisis, policymakers might well find a rapid and bold resetting of the system is worth the risk.

## **7. Policy divergence: Changes in student funding systems across the UK since 2002/03**

**Claire Callender**

### **Introduction**

Central to the expansion of higher education is how it is funded and who pays. This debate predates HEPI's launch 20 years ago and continues today. At stake are equal access and the sector's financial sustainability and quality. These are driven by ideological, political and economic decisions about the amount and balance of financial contributions from individual students, graduates and their families, and from the state and taxpayers.

The trend overall, starting in the 1990s but intensifying in the last decade, has been to shift more of the costs of higher education away from the state onto the shoulders of individuals. This reflects other policy developments which relocate responsibility for welfare and wellbeing from the state to the individual through 'financialisation'.<sup>1</sup> It has been achieved in higher education through the introduction and expansion of tuition fees and student loans which call upon the ideological mantra of 'who benefits, pays'. Students and graduates are deemed by policymakers as key beneficiaries of higher education because of the financial returns most reap from their higher education, and which render the repayment of tuition fees and maintenance loans affordable.

However, a distinctive feature of the UK's student funding system is the differences between its four parts – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) – in their policies, emphasis on public and private financial contributions and,

consequently, in their mix of student financial support. The funding policy divergence, resulting from political devolution, has become more pronounced since HEPI's creation in 2002 with varying implications for the four higher education systems, their students and graduates.

This chapter charts key changes in student funding provision since 2002 with an emphasis on first-time undergraduate full-time students. It discusses significant differences between the UK jurisdictions and by students' domiciles and their mode of study.

### **Student funding, 1998-2005**

From 1998, all first-time full-time undergraduates were subject to means-tested tuition fees of £1,000 per year paid upfront.<sup>2</sup> These students were also eligible for maintenance loans, first introduced in 1990 and subsequently partially means-tested; these were operated through the Student Loans Company (SLC), a quasi-government agency responsible for administering student financial support throughout the UK.

This system remained in place in England, Wales and NI until 2005, with Scotland using its devolved powers to abolish tuition fees for Scottish-domiciled students studying in Scotland in 2000. The following year, Scotland reintroduced national means-tested grants for young locally domiciled students of up to £2,000 to augment existing maintenance loans. It also established a one-off contribution of £2,000 (the 'graduate endowment') repaid post-graduation.

### **Student funding, 2006 to 2011**

Following the Labour Government's 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, in 2006 full-time undergraduate



tuition fees were raised and capped to a maximum of £3,000 per annum in England and Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> All full-time undergraduates domiciled in England or Northern Ireland, irrespective of their socio-economic background, paid fees wherever they studied in the UK. All qualified for newly formulated income-contingent loans (ICL) covering all their tuition and some living costs.<sup>4</sup> These loans removed up-front cost barriers to higher education whereby higher education was free at the point of entry for all undergraduates, making the tuition fee rises more politically and socially acceptable.

The repayments of income-contingent maintenance and fee loans in the UK – which continue today – are based on graduates' income and ability to pay. They are designed to protect graduates from excessive loan repayments, financial hardship or defaulting on repayments – unlike traditional 'mortgage style' student loans, the commonest model worldwide. Graduates start repaying their loans once their post-graduation income reaches the government-set repayment threshold. They pay 9% of their income above the threshold until they have repaid their loans in full (including interest accrued), with any outstanding debt written off after a set number of years. Repayments are automatically deducted from graduates' gross wages via the tax system.

The Westminster government launched other financial support for low-income full-time students because of concerns that the tuition fee increase would deter higher education participation. They re-introduced means-tested maintenance grants of up to £2,765 previously abolished in 1998, and in England, established cash bursaries or fee waivers funded from universities' additional tuition fee income. Consequently, low-income students qualified for grants, loans, and bursaries

toward their living costs, while their more affluent peers were only eligible for loans.

Policy changes in England provoke different responses in each of the other three regions of the UK, at different times, for a combination of practical, financial and political reasons which vary between jurisdictions. Both Welsh and Scottish administrations used their student funding policies to demonstrate the apparent advantages of devolution. In Wales, tuition fee arrangements remained unchanged until 2007/08 when fees of £3,000, underwritten by income-contingent loans, were launched alongside a non-means-tested fee grant of £1,845 for all Welsh students studying in Wales, reducing *de facto* students' fee liability. But this fee grant was subsequently abolished in 2010/11. However, means-tested maintenance grants, first re-introduced in 2002, were increased to £5,000 in 2010, making the grant considerably higher than elsewhere in the UK.

By contrast, Scotland took a different path in 2007. It abolished the graduate endowment with the Scottish government paying the tuition fees of Scottish and EU students studying at Scottish universities. Scotland's free tuition, which continues today, makes it unique in the UK. It exemplifies the principles of universalism rather than of the marketisation which characterises the English higher education system. And it frames higher education as a public good rather than a private good, unlike in England, with access slated as based on 'the ability to learn rather than the ability to pay'.<sup>5</sup> However, as discussed below, constraints on the public funds available have an impact on the number of 'tuition free' university places Scottish universities can offer.

## **Student funding 2012 – present day**

### ***England***

In England, the Coalition Government enacted further reforms in 2012 following the 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, prompting further marketisation of higher education, with funding following the student to promote greater student choice and provider competition.<sup>6</sup> The Westminster Government initially raised the cap on full-time undergraduate tuition fees to £9,000, repaid by income-contingent loans, and then increased this marginally in 2017 to £9,250. Simultaneously, it withdrew most of its direct funding for teaching to higher education institutions, making them far more reliant on tuition fee income and, over time, radically reshaping the pattern, scale and sources of funding. In 2020/21, 55% of English HEIs' total income came from tuition fees and 10% directly from government grants, compared with 32% and 33% respectively a decade earlier.<sup>7</sup> These policy changes have allowed Westminster governments to rely increasingly on tuition fees to fund English higher education and cut direct funding, more so than in other UK jurisdictions. The upfront balance of private and public financial contributions has shifted dramatically with tuition fees and loans shouldered by individuals replacing collective direct public funding.

But since 2017, fee levels have been frozen and latterly inflation has eroded their real term value to £6,585 (in 2012 prices) to institutions' cost, thus, bringing into question the financial sustainability of this particular English funding model.<sup>8</sup>

In 2016, the Conservative Government abolished undergraduate maintenance grants, rendering England unique within the

UK in terms of grant provision. It replaced grants with larger, but stringently mean-tested, maintenance loans. But it left untouched the parental earnings threshold for the receipt of maximum loans, which has been frozen since 2008. Thus, increasing proportions of students from middle-to-lower income backgrounds receive smaller maintenance loans, while the poorest graduate with the largest student loan debt. Furthermore, recently maintenance loans (ranging from £4,651 to £13,200 in 2023) have not risen in line with the true measure of inflation, contributing to a students' cost-of-living crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally in 2012, the Government, for the first time, introduced comprehensive financial support for part-time English undergraduates, mirroring full-time provision with tuition fees capped at £6,750 in 2012, raising to £6,935 in 2017, and tuition and maintenance income-contingent loans.<sup>10</sup> However, the eligibility criteria for these loans tend to disadvantage part-time students, leading to sharp declines in part-time enrolments in England after 2012. In contrast, after an initial blip, full-time numbers continued to rise, aided by the lifting of the cap on student numbers in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

The overall structure of the income-contingent loan repayment arrangements introduced in 2006 remained in 2012 and are still in place today throughout the UK. What now varies between UK jurisdictions, and has changed since 2006 for English undergraduates, is: the ICL repayment threshold (rising from £15,000 in 2006 to £21,000 in 2012 and £25,000 in 2018 to £27,295 by 2022 and back down to £25,000 in 2023); the debt write-off period (lengthening from 25 years in 2006 to 30 in 2012 and 40 in 2023); and interest rates (increasing from RPI to income-contingent rates of up to RPI+3% in 2012, and falling back to RPI in 2023).

These loan repayment modifications aim to cut public expenditure on higher education. Specifically, governments have sought to reduce the level of income-contingent loan subsidy. In 2020/21, for every £1 the Westminster government loaned English-domiciled undergraduates, it could expect to receive back 56p – a subsidy of 44%. Only 20% of full-time undergraduates starting university in 2021/22 are expected to repay their loan in full before the government writes off their debt. But the Government hopes that, following its 2023 reforms, this will rise to 55% for the 2023/24 cohort as more lower-to-middle income graduates will enter repayment, repay more for longer and be in debt to the SLC for most of their working lives.<sup>12</sup>

## ***Wales***

In 2012, the maximum tuition fee that institutions in Wales could charge was raised to £9,000 and continues today. However, students ordinarily resident in Wales only paid fees of £3,465 (the figure that had applied in England) and were eligible for income-contingent loans to cover all their tuition fees. Welsh students studying elsewhere in the UK and facing fees of £9,000 also qualified for an additional non-means tested tuition fee grant up to a maximum of £5,535 to cover the higher fees. Consequently, Welsh undergraduates studying elsewhere in the UK paid lower fees than their English peers because of this dedicated fee grant covering all fee costs over £3,465 which effectively capped fees.

This fee grant was replaced by others following the Diamond Review which invoked ‘progressive universalism’ to guide its reforms.<sup>77</sup> Since 2018, all full-time Welsh undergraduates have been entitled to maintenance support totalling a minimum of

£9,950 per year in 2023/24.<sup>13</sup> This aid consists of a mixture of non-repayable means-tested grants and maintenance loans, with the balance between grants and loans determined by students' household income.<sup>14</sup> Thus low-income students receive nearly all their living support as a grant, and high-income students as loans who will borrow and owe much more than their less affluent peers. Part-time students are similarly eligible for tuition fee income-contingent loans and maintenance grants and loans.<sup>15</sup> Wales's shift to higher maintenance grants is unique in the UK, as is its distinctive approach to combining means-tested and non-means-tested benefits and targeting of grants. Both are indicative of Wales's emphasis on financial support for living costs.

### **Scotland**

Following the 2012 reforms in England, Scotland kept free tuition for Scots (and EU citizens) studying in Scotland, increased loans to £9,000 for Scottish students studying elsewhere in the UK and increased the cap on tuition fees for students from the rest of the UK to match the £9,000 in England.<sup>17</sup> Scotland has prioritised free tuition at the expense of generous and targeted financial support for living costs.<sup>18</sup> In 2013, the Government cut the maximum means-tested maintenance grants for both young and mature students, then increased and subsequently froze them. By 2023/24, undergraduates qualified for grants (bursaries) up to £2,000, depending on their household income and age – far less generous than grants in Wales or Northern Ireland. The reduced grant income is off-set by higher partially means-tested maintenance loans, ranging from £6,000 to £8,000 by 2023, with the poorest students receiving both the largest grant aid and loans.<sup>19</sup> But the distribution of student loan

debt is regressive with the poorest graduating with the largest student loan debt, as they do in England. In March 2023, the Scottish Government announced a £900 uplift of bursary and loan packages for the following academic year.

Another 'cost' of Scotland's free tuition is the Government's cap on Scottish student numbers, potentially to the detriment of widening participation. No such limits exist for students from outside Scotland, leading some to suggest that institutions in Scotland recruit such students to bolster their financial position at the expense of local students.

### ***Northern Ireland***

Northern Ireland's response to the 2012 English reforms was different to that in Wales and Scotland, illustrating yet another approach to the balance of public and private contribution to higher education costs. In 2012, the Executive capped tuition fees at £3,465 for Northern Irish students studying in Northern Ireland, raising the cap to £4,710 by 2023/24 – far lower fees than England or Wales. Northern Ireland, therefore, has retained more of a dual funding system than the rest of the UK, with substantial funding coming from both tuition fees and directly from public grants. In 2012, the maximum tuition fee loan was raised to £9,000 for Northern Irish students studying elsewhere in the UK while students from the rest of the UK paid fees of up to £9,000 to study in Northern Ireland. Maintenance grants and loans for full-time students domiciled in Northern Ireland were available for study anywhere in the UK. By 2023/24, the maximum grant was £3,475 and maximum loan £6,766, which was increased for the first time since 2009.<sup>20</sup>

## Discussion

Over the past 20 years, since HEPI's launch, the pattern, scale and sources of higher education institutions' funding has been reshaped radically across the UK jurisdictions. Differences in the headline student funding policies have become more marked. These could not have been formulated and effected without the political, economic and ideological shifts that drove and shaped the introduction of income-contingent loans and tuition fees. But there are trade-offs. Scotland stands out for its free tuition for Scottish students. But this is at the cost of grant aid for low-income students, a regressive loan system whereby the poorest students graduate with the largest debts, and the lowest unit-of-resource for full-time degrees in the UK as well as a cap on the number of Scottish-domiciled students. Wales's student maintenance package is the most generous in the UK, with higher headline figures and a mixture of grants and loans but loan debt has increased for all students, including the poorest – especially since 2018. Northern Ireland has the lowest tuition fees but the second lowest unit-of-resource after Scotland. England has the highest tuition fees, no grant aid, a regressive loan system but the highest unit-of-resource in the UK.

Common among all four parts of the UK are the increasing use of income-contingent loans, for tuition fees and / or maintenance. England now plans to extend income-contingent loans through the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, which aims to provide more flexible funding for full, part-time and modular courses at Levels 4 to 6. But income-contingent loans remain largely unchallenged. Policy documents consistently portray income-contingent loans as fair and progressive, with equitable outcomes.



They are considered equitable because those who benefit financially from higher education contribute towards its costs when they can afford to, reducing risk aversion in higher education decisions. Income-contingent loans are deemed progressive because higher earning graduates repay more and are subsidised less by government, than lower earning graduates. Income-contingent loans are seen as positive with equitable outcomes because they help remove up-front cost barriers to higher education. They are regarded as efficient because debt recovery (via the tax system) and administration costs are low. Additionally, income-contingent loans can encourage access and widening participation, help fund higher education expansion and protect the sector's financial sustainability.<sup>21</sup> Thus governments tend to perceive income-contingent loans as benign transactions while simultaneously encouraging indebtedness and normalising it as an 'investment' in future earnings potential. However, this is not necessarily how indebted students or graduates experience student loan debt.

UK governments' increasing use of income-contingent loans has resulted in students' growing dependence on loans to fund their studies, rising loan take-up rates and mounting levels of student loan debt. For instance, in England in 2020/21, 94% of full-time undergraduates took out loans, up from 81% in 2009/10, with the wealthiest far the most likely to be debt-free.<sup>22</sup> Average annual student loan borrowing for both tuition and maintenance have increased significantly across all UK jurisdictions since 2013/14.

*Changes in average annual student borrowing in the UK, 2013/14-2021/22*<sup>23</sup>

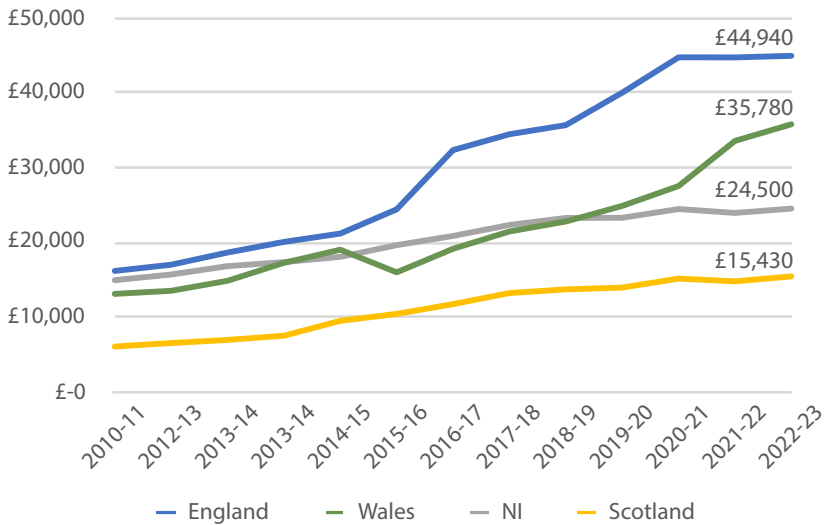
	2013/14	2021/22	Change since 2013/14	2013/14	2021/22	Change since 2013/14	2013/14	2021/22	Change since 2013/14
<b>England</b>	6,140	8,320	36%	3,310	7,010	112%	9,450	15,330	62%
<b>Scotland</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	2,430	5,120	111%	2,430	5,120	111%
<b>Wales</b>	3,410	8,380	146%	3,340	5,720	71%	6,750	14,100	109%
<b>NI</b>	3,940	5,450	38%	2,700	3,130	16%	6,640	8,580	29%

Outside Northern Ireland, the rise is particularly marked for maintenance support, but the 2018 Welsh reforms have contributed to considerable increases in tuition fee debt too.

Unsurprisingly, given England’s lack of grant aid and high tuition fees, England boasts the highest average levels of borrowing and debt (not only in the UK, but throughout the OECD).<sup>24</sup> English students graduating in 2022/23 had student loan debts averaging £44,940, three times the amount owed by those graduating in 2009.

These average debts are far higher than those experienced by Welsh (£35,780), Northern Irish (£24,500) or Scottish (£15,430) students.<sup>25</sup> It will take English students longer on average than their UK peers to repay their loans.

## Average loan balance on entry into repayment in the UK – 2010/11 to 2022/23<sup>26</sup>



Research suggests prospective students' higher education decisions about whether to enter higher education, and where and what to study can be shaped by the prospect of income-contingent loan debt.<sup>27</sup> And debt can shape current students' experience of higher education too.<sup>28</sup> Student funding arrangements, tuition fees, loans and debt play an important role in students' higher education access and choices and in different countries' overall higher education participation patterns. But the key determinants of higher education lie outside the funding system in students' socioeconomic background and prior academic attainment.

However, the longer-term consequence of student loan debt for graduates' lives should not be ignored as they are by governments. Government rhetoric, and most extant research,

fail to acknowledge the potential detrimental repercussions of income-contingent loans for graduates' lives. Emerging evidence from England suggests that income-contingent loan debt is not as harmless for graduates as portrayed by policymakers. Debt adversely affects most graduates' lives with the impact falling on a continuum. Contrary to policy rhetoric and policymakers' intentions, the protective features of income-contingent loans only effectively shield a minority from their harmful consequences.<sup>29</sup>

Income-contingent loans debt can produce and reinforce inequality while inhibiting future opportunities and potential. It can deter postgraduate study; negatively influence graduates' job and career decisions; constrain housing options; and have direct adverse financial impacts. The debt seems to constrain opportunities and hinder futures. So, while income-contingent loans can open doors, they can shut doors too.

## Notes

- 1 Pathik Pathak, 'Ethopolitics and the Financial Citizen', *Sociological Review*, vol. 62 no. 1, 2014, pp.90-116
- 2 These fees, and the £3,000 cap that followed, were index-linked – for ease, initial figures are cited here, other than at points where the specific amount is pertinent.
- 3 Department for Education and Skills, *The future of higher education*, 2003 <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2003-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf>
- 4 The amount of maintenance loan students receive varies depending on their household income, where they live while studying, where in the country they study and their age.
- 5 Roger Brown and Helen Carasso, *Everything for Sale?: The Marketisation of UK Higher Education*, 2013; Sheila Riddell, 'Scottish Higher Education and Devolution' in Sheila Riddell, Elisabet Weedon and Sarah Minty (eds), *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK*:

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- 7 Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'What is the income of HE providers?', 2023 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/finances/income>. The comparable 2020/21 figures for Wales were 54% and 17%; Scotland 37% and 27%; and Northern Ireland 37% and 31%.
- 8 <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/opening-national-conversation-university>
- 9 For details see <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance>
- 10 Maintenance loans were introduced in 2018 but wholly distance learners such as students at the Open University are ineligible for them.
- 11 Claire Callender and John Thompson, *The lost part-timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England*, 2018 <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-Lost-Part-Timers-Final.pdf>
- 12 Student loan forecasts for England <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/student-loan-forecasts-for-england>
- 13 Ian Diamond, *The review of student support and higher education funding in Wales: Final report*, Welsh Government, 2016, p.5 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/higher-education-funding-final-report-en.pdf>
- 14 This figure rises to £10,720 for Welsh students studying away from home (excluding London).
- 15 For details, see <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/undergraduate-finance/>
- 16 In 2023/24, part time students can get tuition fee loans of up to £2,625 at a university or college in Wales or studying at The Open University, £6,935 at a public university or college outside Wales or £4,625 at a private university or college outside Wales.
- 17 These are capped, currently, at the same level as that set for English universities – £9,250.

- 18 The repayment threshold in 2023 is £25,375 and debt is forgiven after 30 years.
- 19 For details, see <https://www.saas.gov.uk/full-time/funding-information-undergraduate>
- 20 For details, see <https://www.studentfinancenetwork.co.uk/types-of-finance/undergraduate/full-time/northern-ireland-student/>
- 21 Richard Murphy, Judy Scott-Clayton and Gill Wyness, 'The end of free college in England: Implications for enrolments, equity, and quality', *Economics of Education Review*, vol. 71, 2019, pp.7–22
- 22 Paul Bolton, *Student Loan Statistics*, House of Commons Library, 2022 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01079/SN01079.pdf>; Ariane de Gayardon, Claire Callender and Francis Green, 'The determinants of student loan take-up in England', *Higher Education*, vol.78 no.6, 2019, pp.965–983 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00381-9>
- 23 Derived from Student Loans Company data [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1035644/avg-maintenance-loan-paid-by-domicile\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1035644/avg-maintenance-loan-paid-by-domicile_2021.pdf); [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1117159/avg-tuition-fee-loan-paid-by-domicile\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1117159/avg-tuition-fee-loan-paid-by-domicile_2022.pdf)
- 24 Note these average figures hide the distribution of debt by students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Data for all four nations on borrowing by household income are not readily available.
- 25 Student Loans Company, *UK comparisons – to financial year 2023*, 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-comparisons-to-financial-year-2023/uk-comparisons-to-financial-year-2023>
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- 28 For example, Diane Harris, Katie Vigurs and Steven Jones, 'Student loans as symbolic violence', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol.43 no.2, pp.132–146 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1771507>; Neil Harrison, Farooq Chudry, Richard Waller and Sue Hatt, 'Towards a Typology of Debt Attitudes among Contemporary Young UK Undergraduates', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol.39 no.1, 2015, pp.85–107 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2013.778966>; Sara Minty, 'Young People's Attitudes towards Student Debt in Scotland and England' in *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK: Diverging or Converging Systems?*, 2015, pp.56–70
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## 8. Students and learning: Then and now

**Alex Bols and Graeme Wise**

At the time of HEPI's foundation in 2003, higher education was one of the key issues in politics and public policy. Student issues were at the centre of this. A new White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, was published by Charles Clarke, a Secretary of State who had himself once been a President of the National Union of Students (NUS). The future it envisaged was one in which students paid a larger share of the cost of higher education but would also gain more – in improved graduate earnings, greater quality of teaching and on-course experience and a stronger voice. It would also be a future in which there would be more students and they would be from more diverse backgrounds.

What students should expect from higher education, who gets to access it and what they should expect to pay, remain some of the central challenges and controversies facing us today. Yet today's debate, about fundamentally the same issues, is radically different in its terms.

This story has coincided with personal journeys taken by us, the authors of this chapter. In 2003, we were early in our careers in the student movement, which laid the foundations for our own work in higher education policy and independent research, covering a range of topics in learning, teaching and student representation. Our reflections on how these matters have evolved cannot fail to be personal and, in the space available here, they must also be quite selective.



## **Disruption and discontent**

The last twenty years have been a time of disruption and divergence. In 2003, political devolution within the UK was still in its infancy, but at that time approaches to student-related issues began to diverge significantly in terms of sector structures, student funding and initiatives used to drive change. This divergence has become much stronger over the years since, so much so that it is hardly possible to speak of a 'UK system' in higher education, at least in relation to learning and teaching.<sup>1</sup> The global financial crisis in 2008/09 triggered a severe long-term squeeze in national budgets and presaged a funding settlement for higher education in which student fees were set at three times the level initially set under the Higher Education Act (2004). The UK's departure from the European Union has both changed the nature of our offer and our obligations to students from the EU, has halved student recruitment from those countries (although the numbers remain much higher than they were in 2003) and has also reduced the mobility of UK students and made graduate careers in Europe at least more difficult to embark upon. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to the learning of the vast majority of students in higher education and all those in earlier educational stages who will feed into the higher education system in the coming years.<sup>2</sup>

Technology has also created significant disruption and change. The last 20 years have seen the rise of the smartphone, while laptops have become ubiquitous, all connected to high-speed broadband and mobile networks. A few years prior to HEPI's formation, the Dearing report of 1997 had envisaged a 'Student Portable Computer' (SPC), those being 'paperback-sized "notebook" computers, capable of sending

and receiving e-mail and accessing the Internet' and foresaw the need for 'adequate provision of network connection ports in institutions into which students can plug their SPCs'.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, desktop computers might be needed at a ratio of up to one for every five students. This all seems rather charming now, but it aptly demonstrates how fortunate we are – had the COVID-19 pandemic occurred only 15 years earlier, it would have been quite impossible to make provision of any kind of distance learning of the sort that was achieved, reliant as it was on almost universal ownership of powerful laptops and especially on widespread institutional and domestic broadband. The potential of advanced blended learning approaches, already well developed in some institutions at the start of 2020, has now been kickstarted everywhere, but it remains to be seen whether this potential will be fully realised or if we will see a reversion over time to previous norms.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, social networks and research tools facilitated through this technology allow students to communicate and study at enormous speed with hugely reduced boundaries and constraints – perhaps at the expense of simple luxuries such as space to make mistakes, of both an academic and social kind, and even just 'the time to think'.

On top of all this, and perhaps because of many of these forces, we have seen the emergence of what has been termed a 'culture war', broad in scope but specific in relation to students. There is consternation about what students can do and say, and what people think they *should* do and say, and these normative judgements tend to apply equally to the activities of students in the present as well as to their life ambitions. If someone was born in 2003, they might by now be a young undergraduate, or may be considering the possibilities of higher education.

Their childhood and young adulthood has been an experience of constant crisis and a dramatic shift in what we might simply call 'the national mood'. The pandemic imposed severe constraints on young people's freedom to explore the world and find their place in it. These factors cannot fail to have an impact on students' perceptions of higher education, how they want to experience it and what they want to do with it. Twenty years ago, the focus turned to the student experience and a sharp debate about how far we should be concerned with value-for-money in higher education. This trend seemed then to become sharper still with every escalation in the fee level. Today the fee level is holding its station and the focus is turning again towards whether the sector still has the capacity to provide the fundamentals of quality and to meet core student needs.

## **Diversification and consolidation**

Over the last 20 years, higher education participation has expanded tremendously and become more diverse in several important respects. The number of qualifications obtained overall increased from 595,640 in 2003/04 to 919,940 by 2021/22. This growth has been driven by a dramatic increase in postgraduate study, which has more than doubled in volume, underpinned by a stronger need for differentiation in the graduate labour market, an enormous range of course choices at this level and the introduction of public postgraduate student loans in 2016/17. Meanwhile, undergraduate numbers have grown by 28%, with iterative addition and diversification of available routes, including foundation degrees, foundation years, degree apprenticeships and accelerated degrees. Collectively, these paths have grown significantly in relative terms, albeit remaining in the minority of overall provision.

Over the same period, part-time higher education numbers collapsed, a casualty of rising fee levels alongside the ELQ (Equivalent or Lower Qualification) rule withdrawing state funding from students with previous qualifications at the same or lower level.

This expansion has seen policy drive ever more significant interventions to improve diversity. Initiatives such as Access Agreements, AimHigher and the Director for Fair Access have sought both to widen the backgrounds of those entering higher education and deepen the activities that universities undertake to widen their pool of applicants. This has increased the proportion of students from a whole range of groups that had previously been excluded from higher education, including students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Black and Minority Ethnic students and disabled students, resulting in a higher education that is more representative of society as a whole. Yet there remains a gulf on many of these metrics between institutions with different levels of prestige and different standard entry requirements, with larger newer universities bringing in more students from diverse backgrounds. Across institutions of all kinds, recent years have seen growing concern over gaps in measured levels of attainment and in labour market outcomes. These are difficult areas to understand what is really going on, with multiple tools being tried, ranging from scrutiny of particular metrics (and sub-metrics for different groups) in the Teaching Excellence Framework to Learning Gain Pilots, with none of them quite providing a clear route towards positive change or guide for practice. The current regime is quite punitive in character, without holding out much promise for real progress, which feels like the wrong balance to strike.

The years ahead will involve considerable pressure on the higher education sector to meet rapidly increasing demand while maintaining quality and making progress on equality and diversity. This will be an increasingly tough landscape. Already student numbers have grown in many institutions so much that study space and learning resources are under huge pressure. In some places, student accommodation is full beyond bursting, with insecurity, the rush for rooms and rising rents adding to a wellbeing crisis. New technological possibilities and preferences can help to mitigate this – for example, library holdings become more available and shareable in the age of eBooks and digital journals, but can also exacerbate it – all canteens become computer labs when those ubiquitous laptops arrive.

### **Teaching and learning, student representation and power**

Over the last 20 years, all governments have prioritised the need to improve teaching in universities, but the way in which they have sought to do it has been quite different. In retrospect, it is possible to identify three phases in the approaches to improve teaching. First, by funding research and enhancements in practice from 2003 to about 2011, which then shifted towards a focus on seeing students as consumers but within the established institutional structure until about 2016, and then a more definitive turn towards consumer power in a regulated market.

The 2003 White Paper heralded significant investment in teaching through the creation of the Centres of Excellence for Teaching and Learning, the development of the Professional Standards Framework and National Teaching Fellowship scheme, increasing the number of staff trained to teach, as

well as bodies such as the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE) supporting professionalisation of teaching, researching approaches to teaching and better recognition of teaching in promotion criteria. Policy drivers have also been used to give students more power over their own experiences. This included the establishment of the National Student Survey to collect students' views, and the chance to complain and seek redress about poor experiences through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. These developments have, by and large, stood the test of time.

We have also seen ever-increasing attention to better information for applicants and students to navigate the higher education sector through a wide range of tools including Programme Specifications, Key Information Sets, UniStats and DiscoverUni. Greater technological capabilities have also played their part here, especially in the realm of data aggregation and analysis, ranging from Longitudinal Educational Outcomes measures of employment and earnings at the national level to institutions' own increased capabilities and usage of learning analytics at the local level. These developments undoubtedly tell us a lot more about the trajectories of students and graduates, through the learning experience and beyond, but also raise the inevitable risk that action is taken primarily to shift the metrics, which might not always be in the interests of the actual people who are represented in them.

The current phase of development has seen institutional change to a far greater extent, with the consumer power emphasis further mobilised through the creation of the Office for Students and the Teaching Excellence Framework, alongside greater attention and stronger guidance from the

Competition and Markets Authority. In 2023, we will journey into truly uncharted territory, with a new iteration of the TEF with the potential to mark out providers as 'requiring improvement'; and the Office for Students directly taking on the primary role in quality assurance processes for an indeterminate period and without clarity as to whether this is to become permanent.

The critical question is: has any of this truly empowered students? That is a complex question and impossible to answer here. But our general view is that when this question is answered either 'yes' or 'no' the answer tends to be asserted ideologically and is not well-rooted in evidence. It does not help that recent financial difficulties within the NUS have led to its policy function being severely diminished in scale or that the research base on higher education in the UK is quite thinly spread and policymakers are not connected well enough with researchers. In the access and participation area, we have a new 'what works' centre, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO), which has made a strong start. There may now be a case for the sector to establish a serious national research institute focused on students and learning in the UK – an agenda that would include a mix of teaching, resources, wellbeing, harnessing and managing new technology, and how to effectively build student agency at a time of considerable turbulence in policy and practice.

We are already seeing some of the trends that may impact over the next 20 years, and it would be prudent to assume that disruption to established practices is likely to continue and accelerate. Technology will play an increasing role in both enhancing existing learning and potentially changing it significantly through new methods of blended provision,

alternative means of credential awarding and powerful artificial intelligence requiring new approaches to both curriculum and assessment. Global events will play their part too, and are hard to predict, although the realities of climate change and stark divisions in international relations are not in doubt. The culture wars will rumble on. New policy developments to improve support for flexible and lifelong learning are difficult to implement, but have never been more essential. We now live in a much more challenged and contentious world than we did in 2003. We will need an education system to match it.

## Notes

- 1 Nick Hillman, *One for all or all four one? Does the UK still have a single higher education sector?*, HEPI Report 129, April 2020 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/16/one-for-all-or-all-four-one-does-the-uk-still-have-a-single-higher-education-sector/>
- 2 Rachel Hewitt, *Students' views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2021*, HEPI Policy Note 29, April 2021 [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HEPI-Policy-Note-29-Students-views-on-the-impact-of-Coronavirus-on-their-higher-education-experience-in-2021-12\\_07\\_21.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HEPI-Policy-Note-29-Students-views-on-the-impact-of-Coronavirus-on-their-higher-education-experience-in-2021-12_07_21.pdf)
- 3 The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the learning society: Main Report*, 2017 <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html>
- 4 Jonathan Neves and Rose Stephenson, *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*, HEPI / Advance HE, June 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2023.pdf>



## 9. Change in the research system

**David Sweeney**

At the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee on the 19 April 2023, Sir Paul Nurse, giving evidence about his Review of the Research Landscape, said 'It has been more or less the same for half a century. I am suggesting – you heard the words – revolution by evolution.'<sup>1</sup> Perhaps 'more or less the same' could be said of the core student education experience at many universities (and the author's student experience was indeed half a century ago) but, at a system level, the education system has seen several resets while the research system has seen more incremental change, as Sir Paul suggests. Nevertheless, those incremental changes in the research system, both in the UK and globally, have been significant, particularly over the last 20 years seen by HEPI. Sir Paul's words may not capture the breadth of change in the research sector, perhaps because the research system changes have not had the attention which has been occasioned by the resets in the education system. This article looks at changes in the university research landscape drivers through the lens of engagement with government, at engagement globally and at challenges to research aims and objectives, noting contrasts with the higher education system.

### **Government, Parliament and the research system**

Debate about education is entwined with the political discourse of our country. Tony Blair's aspiration for participation was announced at a party conference and intended as a differentiating factor in the political cut and thrust. Education policy remains a political differentiator, though perhaps

more in rhetoric than specific policy proposals. Research and development is not so entwined and has remained a government enthusiasm for over 60 years, perhaps beginning with Harold Wilson's 'The White Heat of Technology' (a 1963 party conference speech) which set a tone for future administrations of both parties.<sup>2</sup> Modes of policy delivery may have been subjected more to the enthusiasms (and experience) of Ministers but always following consistent policy directions. Helpfully, a succession of UK 'gold medals' (DNA 'fingerprinting', cloning Dolly the Sheep, the discovery of pulsars, graphene, the Higgs-Boson, the Covid vaccine and many many more) have allowed whoever is in power to celebrate the success of their investment in research and development, or perhaps the success of previous administration's investments.

The drivers of change from government have very much been about accountability, the power to control research directions (though not much exercised) and – inevitably – funding. These matters partly lie with Ministers of the day but also notably with Parliament, where we have seen beneficial research-related Acts of Parliament, serious and informed scrutiny from Select Committees and independent balanced and accessible analysis of public policy issues from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. As HEPI was established in the early 2000s, the Government's Office for Science and Technology (OST) set up Research Councils UK (essentially a co-ordinating committee of the distinct disciplinary Research Councils 'led by' OST's Director General of the Research Councils). A 2005 report showed the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee were deeply unimpressed that the Director-General may have 'led', but he was clear this did not amount to accountability for the Councils (he being a government official and they being arms-

length bodies) and that the Chair of RCUK (one of the Chief Executives but rotating in this post) was similarly not willing or able to speak on behalf of all of the Councils.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to concern about parliamentary accountability, the Government, having clearly set out its aims in a significant *Science and Innovation Investment Framework* in 2004, was disobliged when it delivered what it considered to be a beneficial Spending Review settlement in 2007 (a 17.5% increase) only to discover that the settlement was insufficient to support the budget of the new Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).<sup>4</sup> There was a subsequent considerable and long-running fuss (the Science and Technology Committee received ‘a substantial volume of correspondence from within the particle physics and astronomy community’) and the new, and short-lived, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills was criticised as was the STFC.<sup>5</sup> The global financial crisis in 2008 exacerbated concerns in government about the locus of consequential funding decisions and, despite the promise of the 2004 *Framework*, there was an uneasy relationship – perhaps best described as a mutual lack of trust – between the research system and government until the establishment of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) in 2018 provided an accountability framework.

The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) built on the Education (No.2) Act (1986) Act and formally established the Haldane Principle in law to general approval, although some of the post-2015 new funding was not delivered through routes where Haldane applied.<sup>6</sup> UKRI addressed the accountability issue decisively (the CEO of UKRI is accountable to the Science Minister) and the relatively smooth transition of the research-related responsibilities of the Higher Education Funding Council

into Research England (within UKRI) and continuing support from the devolved funding bodies meant this structural reset did not lead to significant change for universities in their approach to research.

At the point that HEPI was established, the 2004 *Framework* also included a new consideration of the full costs of research (direct and indirect costs) when awarding grants. A costing system – TRAC, the Transparent Approach to Costing – had been implemented at the turn of the century in response to work which showed that the research infrastructure in universities had deteriorated to a worrying level and threatened the country's ability to contribute to global research efforts. The 'Full Economic Cost' (fEC) arrangements came into play, with an arrangement whereby public funders committed to meeting 80% of the full costs while universities, being active participants in research direction choices and not just contract research organisations, took responsibility for 20% of the costs.

No change in that formal position has occurred but continuing budgetary pressures has led incrementally to a further 10% or so of the costs passing to the university. Arguably that change has been manageable – because of the steady increase in overseas student income – but it is not now clear whether other pressures might mean the system needs a reset.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the lack of a contemporary rationale for the allocation of research costs suggests that some reset, as opposed to further incremental change, may be required.

## **Global engagement**

The UK higher education system offers a distinctive and globally competitive offer which, alongside US higher

education, has become the venue of choice for students from across the world.<sup>8</sup> The UK's reputation is often endorsed by funding and support from other governments in their choices of location for higher education provision. In contrast, the UK research system is fully globally engaged, through outward, as well as inward, mobility; it offers an attractive venue for researchers to pursue their careers but equally encourages UK researchers to help lead projects all over the world. Sir Paul Nurse himself is an example, spending almost half of the last 20 years in the US. Success in collaborative projects overseas with UK participation is celebrated as a UK success. The days of 'brain drain' rhetoric (at least in research) had probably passed by the time of the 2004 *Framework* and UK universities have been a 'partner of choice' for many overseas organisations rather than a 'competitor'. The current discourse of 'Science Superpower' can more reasonably be understood in that light than in an explicitly competitive one.

The UK system had no need to reset to play that role but various incremental changes were supportive, notably in some beneficial visa arrangements, in universities providing enhanced facilities for researchers from abroad, in the development of very strong collaborations through government development aid (for example, the Official Development Assistance (ODA) / Foreign, Commonwealth & Development and Commonwealth Office) funding and in the building of strong research clusters around universities. Until recently particularly strong European collaboration was fostered by the government, by universities and by researchers. The threats to the UK of being unable to continue collaborative work with European partners (by continuing engagement with the European Commission's Horizon scheme) and the

loss of a significant amount of Government Aid funding may lead to a reset and, as this is written, the alternative to Horizon ('Pioneer') can be interpreted either as incremental change or a reset.

Many other changes to the research system over the last twenty years have been driven by the UK's global engagement, and in some cases led by the UK. The importance of working across disciplines to tackle research challenges has been better recognised with various Units, Institutes and Centres set up to bridge possible disconnections that may arise from a university structure which looks very similar to that of 20 years ago. There has been greater attention to research integrity and reproducibility with a plethora of training, guidelines and policies. Doctoral training has progressively been revised with increases in funding, more structured programmes (including taught components and professional development activities), the establishment of centres with interdisciplinary training opportunities and by collaborative awards between universities and other organisations. Increased numbers of students from overseas have enriched the UK's research culture. Completion rates have improved a little but time-to-completion has also increased and there is still a gap between the expectations of PhD candidates and the opportunities which are open to them after completion.<sup>9</sup> The case for further incremental change is strong but within a framework of global approaches to doctoral study.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion matters have been significantly addressed in some areas, with Advance HE's Athena Swan programme much admired by some other countries, but alongside much broader, but not always well-defined matters of 'research culture' remain more of a challenge for the next

20 years than an achievement in the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> In the EU and the UK, there is considerable attention to how different forms of research assessment might provide a reset to our approach to various culture issues. However, the general principle of 'openness' has been taken forward in the sphere of research publications – with significant leadership from the UK working with European partners – but with more limited progress on open data and open research practices.

All of this indicates that Sir Paul's 'nothing has changed' comment might not quite be so apposite but would largely endorse his 'revolution by evolution' statement.

## **Research aims and purposes**

The education system saw significant resets to the purpose of higher education just as HEPI was established. The move from polytechnics to universities (formally in 1992 but with significant institutional refocusing at the start of the HEPI period) and the encouragement of 'alternative providers' were both resets. No such structural change happened in research, but over the period there has been movement in what has been recognised as 'research success' – what the research system was intended to deliver for citizens and society.

Those whose conception focussed on 'basic research' – recognised by particular success criteria such as the percentage of highly-cited papers and the number of Nobel prizes won – might feel there has been a reset. However, this characterisation of research misrepresents the research landscape which developed after (as long ago as) 1945. For example, through the previous Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) and the relevant government department

there was a collection of experimental horticulture stations around the country (very much industry driven) and over 20 research institutes in different sectors and areas. The post-war development of the research landscape was broadly conceived and, as in the United States, often not centred around a university. Before and after 2003 this changed incrementally, with influence from UK drivers which may not be appropriately recognised and are often ignored when critiques are made of the current system.

Government funding was under continuing pressure as the source was often government departments where research was not always a visible priority, and where funding cuts could more easily be made in organisations which were some distance from Whitehall. Secondly, the Research Councils understandably struggled to manage and fund disparate organisations alongside their primary approach of responsive-mode grant funding. Thirdly, the organisations themselves had limited ability to win their own grant funding as they were required to make a significant contribution to cover the full costs of research but lacked sources of funds to do that. They also had limited amounts to invest in new directions on their own account. It was politically challenging (particularly against local pressures) and expensive to reorganise, as the AFRC found when moving from over 20 institutes to eight multi-site institutes.

No system reset occurred, partly because universities, growing in income, influence and mission, were willing to share the responsibility for many of those research organisations. Sometimes that responsibility was interpreted as 'investing' (without many of the bureaucratic constraints which happen with government investment) or as 'rationalising'



with the university repurposing the infrastructure gained for other developments. The Medical Research Council was particularly enthusiastic at moving institutes inside university responsibility and the research staff were generally enthusiastic about the benefits of working with a major research university. So, incrementally, the landscape moved towards a university-centric approach, though with some pushback from government due to the loss of government control. Comments were made about 'passing the authority for research direction decisions into university hands' but even the government struggles to maintain authority when giving up funding responsibility and expecting another party to provide the investment.

If disinvesting from one kind of research, the government did make distinctive and newly-funded approaches to the research landscape as set out in the 2004 *Framework*; perhaps this is the closest to a 'research system reset', though it is of limited funding importance to the university sector. The Technology Strategy Board established in 2003, focussing on research and innovation for business, became an arms-length agency in 2007 and was renamed Innovate UK in 2014 and then merged into UKRI in 2018. Each of those steps played into a challenge from government that research, as seen from Westminster, should be delivering outcomes for all aspects of society, though with particular attention to economic impact. Alongside the core research effort, many science parks were established and there was a considerable increase in the number of new businesses ('spin-outs') developed by academic founders and enhanced by close engagement with leading US universities such as MIT, Stanford and Columbia.

This approach was particularly visible in the requirement that research impact should inform the assessment of research quality, through the Research Assessment Exercise and its successor, the Research Excellence Framework.<sup>11</sup> These assessments were primarily carried out as an accountability mechanism to assure government that research funding was being delivered effectively and efficiently. They have become a significant lever towards increased engagement with business and society by amending the definition of ‘excellence’ to include an assessment of the ‘impact’ of that investment. Initially there was fierce opposition to the concept, notably from Nobel prize winners (though those generally are awarded long after the research was carried out and because of impact which could rarely be bettered). In the event, the government welcomed the outcome of the change and universities and researchers rapidly adjusted to the concept, which sat well with the broader purposes of universities as significant economic and cultural actors in most parts of the country.

This government push for broader research outcomes was backed with additional resources, including new schemes such as the UK Research Partnership Investment Fund [UKRPIF] (giving public funds to support university research which was privately funded), the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (where the government set the challenges but a fruitful collaboration between Innovate UK and the Research Councils chose the projects), Strength in Places (rewarding regional partnerships mostly based around universities) and now Innovation Accelerators (rewarding more structured regional partnerships). Additionally, a plethora of new Institutes were

established, often named after prominent UK citizens (Francis Crick, Henry Royce, Rosalind Franklin, Alan Turing, Michael Faraday as well as the Dementia Institute) usually with some, but varying, forms of university partnership. A number of business-focused Catapult Centres were also set up, with some including significant university investment.

While the education sector went through revolutions in structure and funding, the research sector incrementally moved from a very unmanaged and diverse system to a more structured system, significantly more focussed on universities and taking advantage of considerable investment from the universities themselves.

## **Conclusion**

As regards the research system and universities, one key question is whether the future lies in further incremental change ('revolution through evolution') or whether the amount of incremental change has stretched the system so much that a reset is required. The most critical current issue appears to be the balance between university investment, often made possible by cross-subsidies from income such as international student fees and external investment (whether from government, private funders or charities). Meanwhile, the issue of whether existing research culture issues require significant reform (including the precarity of research careers, the principal investigator / research team relationship, whether research is significantly informed by diverse perspectives and engagement) leading also to increased costs, remains. Both of these matters are subject of fairly charged debate and HEPI will be a platform for the debate and discussion to take place over the next 20 years.

## Notes

- 1 Nobel Laureate and Chief Executive Officer of The Francis Crick Institute
- 2 Matthew Francis, 'Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' speech 50 years on', 19 September 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2013/sep/19/harold-wilson-white-heat-technology-speech>
- 3 Science and Technology Committee, *The Work of Research Councils UK*, 2005 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmsctech/219/219.pdf>
- 4 HM Treasury, *Science and innovation investment framework 2004-2014*, July 2004 [https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100407170242/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending\\_sr04\\_science.htm](https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100407170242/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_sr04_science.htm)
- 5 Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, *Science Budget Allocations*, 2008 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmdius/215/215.pdf>
- 6 The Government does not take decisions on which particular research projects to fund but delegates decisions to the Research Councils.
- 7 Nick Hillman, *From T to R revisited: Cross-subsidies from teaching to research after Augar and the 2.4% R&D target*, with a Foreword by Professor Robert Van de Noort, HEPI Report 127, March 2020 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/From-T-to-R-revisited.pdf>
- 8 London Economics, *The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy*, Report produced jointly by HEPI, Universities UK International and Kaplan International Pathways, May 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Full-Report-Benefits-and-costs-of-international-students.pdf>
- 9 Bethan Cornell, *PhD students and their careers*, HEPI Policy Note 25, July 2020 [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HEPI-Policy-Note-25-PhD-students-careers\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HEPI-Policy-Note-25-PhD-students-careers_FINAL.pdf)
- 10 <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>
- 11 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20091118100710/http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2008/01/> and <https://ref.ac.uk/>

# **10. The changing profile and work experiences of higher education staff in the 21st century**

**Celia Whitchurch**

## **Introduction**

The material in this chapter is drawn principally from a research project that I conducted with William Locke and Giulio Marini for the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) on the changing nature of the workforce in UK higher education between 2017 and 2020.<sup>1,2</sup> In this research, we sought to capture the lived experience of staff having both academic and professional contracts, reviewing these in the context of trends in workforce patterns shown by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) annual staff datasets.

Although the trends represented in numerical datasets provide a neat summary, they do not depict the whole story in terms of the day-to-day lives and aspirations of individuals as they develop their roles and careers. By adding a qualitative dimension through interviews, we were able to understand better the working lives and career aspirations of the individuals who are included in those figures. Findings included an increased fluidity in academic careers and approaches to them, and ways in which individuals negotiated their roles.

## **Changing academic staff profiles**

HESA datasets record shifts in the balance of the academic profession over the last decade or so. The number of academic staff in UK higher education institutions increased by 29% in just 12 years, as the table shows. However, the proportion

on teaching and research contracts fell from 52.3% to 42.8% during the same period.

In contrast, over the same period, the number of staff in teaching-only roles increased by 80%. Thus, the proportion of total academic staff with contracts described as teaching-only increased from almost 25% to almost 35% between 2010/11 and 2021/22.<sup>3</sup> Of those staff who do teach, at the start of this period 32% were on teaching-only contracts, a figure that increased to 45% in just 12 years.

Furthermore, by the end of this period 24% of full-time academic staff and 51% of part-time academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts.

There is evidence that some of those on teaching and research contracts are being directed to conduct less or no research (or are receiving less or no funding or time allocation for research), and so are effectively undertaking teaching-only roles, despite their contractual status.<sup>4</sup> There has also been an increase in the number of academic staff on research-only contracts, from 40,740 in 2010/11 to 51,005 in 2021/22.

*Academic staff by employment function, selected years 2010/11 to 2021/22<sup>5</sup>*

	2010/11		2013/14		2016/17		2019/20		2021/22	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teaching-only	45,005	24.8	52,575	27.1	56,130	27.1	72,540	32.5	81,020	34.6
Teaching and research	94,760	52.3	94,480	48.6	100,165	48.4	98,085	43.9	100,160	42.8
Research-only	40,740	22.3	45,580	23.5	49,085	23.7	51,510	23.0	51,005	21.8
Neither teaching nor research	685	0.4	1,605	0.8	1,490	0.7	1,390	0.6	1,745	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>181,190</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>194,235</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>206,870</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>223,525</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>233,930</b>	<b>100</b>

Teaching-only staff are predominantly part-time (67.5% in 2021/22). However, in the last few years there has been a growing proportion who are full-time, rising from 24.5% in 2014/15 to 32.5% in 2021/22. Although historically the majority were fixed-term, in 2021/22 over a quarter had full-time, open-ended / permanent contracts, compared with 19.8% in 2014/15. Less than a third of those on research-only contracts are on open-ended / permanent contracts, as the majority of these positions are funded from fixed-term research project funding.

### **Changes in the work experiences of academic staff**

Large datasets, such as those provided by the HESA data, help to provide an over-arching map of the sector, but do not necessarily reflect the day-to-day experience of individuals. On the one hand, they provide some evidence for a narrative of an increasingly competitive, precarious and insecure environment, leading to a 'casualisation' of the workforce, an erosion of autonomy and a sense of de-professionalisation.<sup>6</sup> This particularly affects early career academics who may take longer to establish themselves in the profession, although mid-career academics can also find themselves stalled if they are not research active and have not found another type of role.<sup>7</sup> The latter may also have choices to make about the future at a time when they could have increased financial and family responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

There are though other narratives at play, and a more nuanced picture has been developed via a number of recent qualitative studies. At the macro level, significant numbers of staff come into higher education from other sectors such as healthcare, business and industry and non-governmental organisations,

and others have strong links outside academia, for example, with professional bodies. Some people enter higher education employment later in their careers, and others move in and out. There are, therefore, a variety of entry and exit points, and external activity has influenced profiles across the range of disciplines. Some people use their academic work as a basis for building a portfolio that could provide a bridge to another type of career, such as policy work with professional bodies or non-governmental organisations, humanitarian work, refugee education, the rehabilitation of offenders, child protection or charitable giving.

Academic staff, therefore, act not only as repositories of disciplinary knowledge, but also foster exchange with other forms of knowledge and practice, often in a bridging role. This trend has been reinforced by the requirement for impact in the UK Research Excellence Framework.<sup>9</sup> Disciplinary boundaries, as described two decades ago, are therefore becoming more permeable, and stretched by professional practice.<sup>10</sup> There is also evidence that, rather than committing to a career in academia, more doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers are considering adjacent roles in higher education, such as research management and administration, or in other sectors. Individuals are, therefore, likely to actively 'plan, and ... construct a way forward [within] given constraints'.<sup>11</sup> They do this by navigating the structures within which they find themselves, including job descriptions and workload models. For example, it is not unusual for some academic staff on teaching-only contracts, and other staff employed on professional contracts, to undertake unfunded research; or for those employed on research contracts to negotiate some teaching to gain experience.



At the same time, many universities have introduced new promotion pathways to professor alongside the traditional teaching and research track, and a smaller proportion have pathways focussing on leadership and innovation.<sup>12</sup> However, there is evidence that staff on such pathways feel they are less likely to reach the level of a chair than if they were undertaking research. Assumptions about a linear career in higher education, meeting certain goals within certain timescales, are therefore changing. An expansion of roles adjacent to academic activity, such as supporting student employability, community engagement and online learning, have led others to move into new spaces and to adopt 'concertina-like' careers, adjusting their activities, and the timescale in which they undertake them, according to their own circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Not only do individuals interpret and modify the structures within which they find themselves, but they also create bespoke spaces and pathways, so that broad brush trends identified in HESA datasets can be belied by individual experiences and even contractual arrangements.

A major recent development has been the acceleration of online and blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there has been a general feeling that the time taken in learning new technologies and developing resources to support online and hybrid forms of learning is not accounted for, or at best underestimated, in workload models. Students, and the staff themselves, are likely to need to support with this, putting undue pressure on individuals. Nevertheless, there have also been positive experiences of teaching online, including improved productivity and increased engagement and interaction with less confident learners.<sup>14</sup> Thus, wider, distributed learner communities could be established with

'an ecosystem of learner supports', consisting of social and personal as well as educational support.<sup>15</sup> There is also the potential for such developments to transform ideas about teaching and student engagement to the extent that education-focused roles might be viewed more positively by both universities and the people in such roles, creating more varied career paths. Furthermore, where online communication – either for teaching or meetings – has created opportunities for more flexible working, this could help to ameliorate work-life balance issues and also support greater inclusivity of both students and staff.

## **Changing professional staff profiles**

Perceptions of an increase in what are seen as 'administrative', 'professional or 'managerial' staff – defined by HESA as 'non-academic' – at the expense of academic staff masks a complex situation. In practice, HESA's most recent dataset show that overall numbers have gone down from 217,580 to 192,235 between 2017 and 2021, apart from 'professional occupations' (up from 44,975 to 46,700). Major falls in staff numbers include 'Managers, directors and senior officials' (11,680 to 9,665), 'Associate professional and technical' (48,625 to 43,985) and 'Administrative and secretarial' (70,630 to 59,435). The latter are likely to reflect a reduction in so-called 'support' staff as a result of factors such as online registration for courses and programmes and the digitisation of records. Moreover, the outsourcing of manual and technical roles may account for a reduction in the 'technical' and 'skilled trades' categories. The increase in professional occupations is likely to reflect, for example, people supporting online learning, outreach, student study skills and welfare. This growth has been attributed to the priority accorded to all aspects of the student experience in a

more marketised environment, as well as a strengthening of central management teams by external appointments.<sup>16</sup> It is also likely to reflect a re-badging of some academic staff who may no longer be research active and have taken on these kinds of roles. This may be done to reduce the proportion of non-research active staff returned in the UK Research Excellence Framework, and / or to offer such individuals (and others) an alternative career path.

### **Changes in the work experiences of professional staff**

So-called 'non-academic' staff have consisted traditionally of people seen as either 'specialists' or 'generalists', specialists in discrete functions such as finance, human resources and estates management and generalists primarily in student services, registry and secretariat roles. Generalists in particular were seen as a kind of 'academic civil service' and this persisted into the 1990s, particularly in the UK.<sup>17</sup> However, a range of other functions have emerged in the last 30 years or so to include, for example, student life and employability, diversity and inclusion, alumni relations, fundraising, research services, outreach and global engagement, often attracting staff who have experience of these types of functions from other organisations and sectors, who may well move out of higher education again as their careers progress. They are likely to see themselves as working in partnership with academic colleagues, rather than necessarily being in a 'service' role.

The formal categorisation of roles as found in the HESA data therefore disguises an increase in collaborative working between academic and professional staff across a range of activities, with a blurring of boundaries between them, for example in broadly based fields such as:

- educational development, including academic practice and learning support;
- study skills and academic writing;
- student employability and skills development;
- educational technology and the development of the digital environment;
- support for underserved students and communities, including diversity and inclusion;
- the management of student success;
- promotion of research enterprise, impact, knowledge exchange and transfer;
- data management, analytics, strategic planning and institutional research; and
- public engagement, alumni relations, charitable and humanitarian work.

These developments have led to the concept of ‘third space’ activity within the higher education workforce.<sup>18</sup> The people undertaking such roles are likely to have degrees at Masters, and increasingly doctoral, level, and to publish papers about their work. As this concept has gained currency internationally, it is apparent that those working in such areas may go unrecognised in formal categorisations and be dependent on self-identification.

As new areas of activity continue to emerge, there is an ongoing need to develop understandings as to how third-space environments, and those within them, might be recognised and progressed within institutions, for example by establishing a ‘third track’ between academic, professional

and other progression routes and developing appropriate job descriptions, reporting lines, promotion criteria and career pathways. Furthermore, the developments in online, hybrid and blended learning noted above could lead to a reconceptualisation of teaching in higher education, incorporating a range of contributions to students' learning and overall educational experiences, including from, for example, counsellors, librarians and specialists in educational technology, study skills and employability initiatives. The acceleration of online and blended learning has therefore highlighted a greater co-dependence between academic and professional staff and could increasingly blur the boundaries between them.

## **Final comments**

The HESA data suggest a fraying at the edges of the concept of a unified academic or professional cadre, with a common experience of linear careers and assumptions about achieving certain career goals within certain timescales. However, the qualitative data from the CGHE study also suggest that, on the one hand, some individuals are increasingly strategic in following a pre-defined pathway, focusing on activities that they believe will bring them credit for career advancement. On the other hand, others – because of circumstances, their backgrounds or specific interests – may take a more bespoke, but less direct career route. In both cases, building a distinguishing self-profile or 'brand', often via online media, has been seen as helpful in achieving recognition, particularly by younger staff. In turn, hierarchical line management relationships tend to be regarded as less significant in day-to-day working than lateral networks, including formal and informal mentors. A combination of statistical and qualitative

data, therefore, tell a story of an increasingly mixed economy in relation to patterns of academic and professional staff, their activities and their career progress.

A recent HEPI report shows that whereas higher education staff score well on benefits, including pensions, leave and sick pay, compared with other sectors, there are increasing levels of precarity in contractual status, in the form of short-term contracts, particularly at the early stages of a career.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, our research (which was conducted pre-pandemic) showed that the 'early stages' of a career can last for 15 years or more after a post-graduation doctorate. However, it also showed that there is more traffic in and out of higher education than hitherto, particularly in practice-based subjects, and that an academic role is no longer necessarily regarded as a 'job for life', particularly by younger cohorts of staff. It would therefore appear that expectations of a full-time linear career lasting 30 to 40 years are likely to be increasingly unrealistic. At the same time, and despite perceptions of increasing workloads, a job in academia would appear to remain a desirable goal in the minds of those who have achieved a doctorate, at least in the initial stages of a career, although they are more likely to maintain an openness to other possible options.

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## 11. Bricks and moolah: Buildings, money and the civic university

William Whyte

Twelfth-century Northampton was one of the intellectual powerhouses of England. Fuelled by the wealth of the town and a long-standing tradition of teaching, it was by the 1180s well on its way to becoming the first serious university in the country.<sup>1</sup> It was so attractive that scholars fleeing problems in other places often sought sanctuary there. Indeed, that was Northampton's undoing. In 1265, the nascent university was crushed to prevent it from luring in anyone else from Oxford. Not until 2005 would Northampton finally get its university and not for another 13 years would the university get its own purpose-built campus. On its opening in September 2018, the *Northampton Chronicle* announced that this was 'The week Northampton became a "student town"'.<sup>2</sup> It was a status that had been a long time coming.

An ambitious piece of urban regeneration, the university's buildings include student accommodation, a six-storey 'Learning Hub', and a five-storey 'Creative Hub'. New bridges and picturesque footpaths connect the campus to the surrounding area. As a result, the university now features as a key part of the Great Northampton Run, which has been designed 'to take in all that is great about the town'.<sup>3</sup> At its opening, the Vice-Chancellor, Nick Petford, set out his ambitions for the project:

*Our civic approach to innovation, impactful research and the economic benefits this brings, will support Northampton more widely to become a more attractive place in drawing talented and skilled young people to study and, importantly, stay after they graduate.<sup>4</sup>*

Ostensibly little more than a generic example of vice-chancellorial rhetoric, this was in fact a telling comment: at one and the same time articulating the belief that buildings attract students and positioning Northampton within the civic university tradition.

Such ambition came at a cost. Northampton's new campus amounted to an investment of £330 million. A considerable sum for any institution, this represented a huge outlay for a university whose annual income was a third of that. What made it possible was debt: a £231 million bond issue, underwritten by the Treasury; and a further £60 million from the public works loan board.<sup>5</sup>

Northampton is undeniably unusual in taking quite so long to acquire a university, then in building quite so boldly and so quickly thereafter. But the themes that characterise its recent development are far from atypical. Ever bigger buildings and ever more talk of civic responsibility have become characteristic features of Britain's higher education sector.

It is not a purely insular development either. Universities across the globe have invested billions in new buildings, competing with one another to recruit and borrowing extensively to pay for such investment. They have been engaged in what one expert commentator described in 2018 as an architectural 'arms race': 'If everyone else is creating bigger, shinier, high-quality, more innovative facilities,' he concludes, 'it's hard not to get involved as well.'<sup>6</sup>

Property development has contributed to a 'financialisation' of higher education even in those jurisdictions, like the Netherlands, where the idea of a publicly-financed university

remains dominant.<sup>7</sup> In England, annual expenditure on capital projects rose to an estimated £4.6 billion in the financial year 2021/22.<sup>8</sup> Not entirely coincidentally, the percentage of providers with an in-year deficit rose from 5% in 2016 to 32% five years later.<sup>9</sup>

The Vice-Chancellor's use of the word 'civic' is also typical. In the last two decades, the idea of the civic university has made a remarkable recovery.<sup>10</sup> In the last three years, more than 100 providers – including Northampton – have joined the Civic University Network.<sup>11</sup> As part of this, institutions with precisely no previous connection to that tradition have rebranded themselves. King's College London (KCL), for instance, announcing its new identity in 2017 as 'A civic university at the heart of London.'<sup>12</sup> We seem, as KCL's Vice-President Deborah Bull puts it, to be living through a 'civic university moment.'<sup>13</sup>

Nor is Northampton the only provider to express these ideals in architecture. At Kingston, a signature, Stirling-prize-winning development called the Town House provides an even bolder example. An eye-catching concrete frame and a succession of open-plan spaces, it is designed to be shared with the community and to provide a 'much needed civic presence.'<sup>14</sup> Announcing its triumph in the pan-European Mies Award for architecture, the jury declared that:

*This is the first time that a university building wins the architecture prize and it shows that there is a need for public educational projects with the quality of this one, which dignifies people's lives through education and being together and gives the same educational possibilities to everybody.*<sup>15</sup>

Here was a civic university building indeed.

Financialisation seems at first sight to sit uneasily with civic idealism. It can appear paradoxical, even contradictory. It certainly marks a distinctive break with the past – especially for institutions like Kingston and Northampton, which were, within living memory, effectively controlled – and funded – by local government. It also distinguishes this moment from the period in which the first civic universities were founded. They were, of course, products of local patriotism and private finance. But they were highly averse to borrowing. In 1925, the Council of the University of Manchester was entirely representative in concluding that its ‘first duty’ was to eliminate any debt.<sup>16</sup>

So how should one explain this new age? How can we account for both financialisation and the revival of the civic university? How should we reconcile Kingston’s open-to-all Town House with its near simultaneous decision to issue a £90 million bond to pay for student accommodation?<sup>17</sup>

In part, of course, it is a rhetorical ploy. Universities currently face severe criticism for the cost of their degrees, for their supposed hostility to free speech, and for their apparent encouragement of all things ‘woke’. What the *Daily Mail* cheerfully describes as a ‘dark shadow’ has fallen – and providers need to offer some light.<sup>18</sup> In his foreword to the final report of the Civic University Commission in 2019, Lord Kerslake was quite clear. Not only do these institutions ‘need all the friends that they can get’; ‘The public’ also ‘needs to understand better the specific benefits that universities can bring.’<sup>19</sup> Emphasising their civic contribution is designed to do just that.

But it is also obviously true that this massive inflow of private finance has made universities more important for their local communities. Underwritten by bonds or developed in partnership with the private sector, student accommodation has grown in scale and in significance. With over 30,000 new units added annually to the university estate, by 2020 there were as many as 650,000 purpose-built student bedrooms in Britain, more than half of them provided by property companies. Coupled with massive investment in academic facilities, the impact of this expansion on towns and cities is hard to deny.<sup>20</sup>

Still more, as local government has experienced cutbacks and as austerity has challenged public services, private finance has left universities in a privileged position. Conceived as ‘anchor institutions’, they are expected to offer ‘place-based leadership.’<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the ‘Preston Model’, in which the University of Central Lancashire has prioritised local procurement has proved highly influential.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the extent to which higher education providers are taking on roles previously associated with other authorities goes well beyond this. In Oxford – hardly everyone’s idea of a civic university – a £4 billion joint venture with Legal and General is designed not least to resolve a local housing crisis by providing 2,000 new homes, with what is described as ‘a mix of affordable tenures and subsidised key worker accommodation.’<sup>23</sup> This financialised version of the civic university is, however, inherently unstable – and the tensions are not hard to discern. At Kingston, it seems, the Town House has proved all too successful in its ambition to ‘invite the community in.’<sup>24</sup> During summer term, access to study facilities is now confined to members of the university.<sup>25</sup> All this accommodation also

increasingly begs the question of affordability for students, two-thirds of whom struggle to pay rising rents in these shiny buildings – especially as both university and private halls of residence are invariably more expensive than renting a room from a private landlord.<sup>26</sup> A return to the past is not possible. The original civic universities were founded as an expression of local success rather than as a means of regenerating left-behind cities. They were socially and intellectually exclusive – and designed to be so. Describing the new buildings for the University of Wales at Cardiff in 1909, the architect was clear that they were ‘private property ... from which the public can at will be wholly excluded, save for a narrow peep through iron screens just to whet the appetites.’<sup>27</sup>

The contemporary civic university is a very different beast indeed. Intended to be inclusive, open, collaborative: in all sorts of ways it offers a real and powerful challenge to the traditional model of higher education as it has evolved in Britain. That is something enabled by private finance; but also something potentially threatened by it too. Whether universities can retain their commitment to change while also remaining dependent on large-scale loans is an interesting question, especially in an era in which interest rates are rising, inflation is soaring and the sums brought in by student fees inexorably decline in real terms.

Certainly, there are some warning signs. At Northampton, the loan for the new campus obliges a university with an annual income of £100 million to find £10 million every year to service the debt. In 2020, the result was a £15.1 million deficit and sanctions from the Treasury as cash reserves fell below the level that would enable repayment.<sup>28</sup> A year later, after much pain, the University was able to report a modest annual surplus; but

it remained the most indebted provider in the country, with a borrowing rate of more than 200% of its income.<sup>29</sup>

Built on previously-contaminated land, to fulfil a civic ideal and to realise the 800-year old dream of a university in Northampton, Waterside Campus represents a triumph of regeneration and, above all, of hope. The necessity for Britain's universities to regenerate both themselves and their communities is clear and becoming ever more pressing. The need for hope is perhaps greater still.

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## **12. Geopolitics of rankings: The positioning of UK higher education and research**

**Ellen Hazelkorn**

The twentieth anniversary of HEPI merits reflection on the positioning of the UK in the context of changes internationally in higher education. What is particularly striking to me is that throughout the twentieth century and earlier, the UK played a critical role in helping to shape the global and European higher education landscape. In contrast, at a time when the values of higher education and transnational collaboration are vulnerable to the crosscurrents of a geopolitically contested world, the UK's position has become more ambiguous.

Ireland provides a valuable vantage point from which to review these changes. As the UK considers its options in the post-Brexit world, Ireland by contrast is proudly celebrating 50 years of EU membership. Membership, and a determined policy to expand secondary and then higher education, have been fundamental to Ireland's dramatic social and economic transformation. From a country heavily dependent on protectionist economic policies and agriculture, it is now a high-skilled internationally-open trading society and one of the best performing economies in the EU.

### **Internationalisation, collaboration and scientific exchange at heart of UK universities**

The values of internationalisation, collaboration and scientific exchange have been intrinsic to UK universities. Arguably, the rapid development of the University of Oxford from 1167 was both a denial of these values – spurred by Henry II banning English students attending the University of Paris –

and an affirmation, when in 1190 Oxford welcomed its first international student. Beginning in the seventeenth century, England and Scotland became leading scientific centres. Discoveries by Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Jethro Tull, George Stephenson, Charles Darwin, Alexander Graham Bell, Alan Turing, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Kathleen Lonsdale and more recently Stephen Hawking, Tim Berners-Lee and Anne McLaren – to name just a few – have had an enormous impact on modern science and society around the world. In 2020, the Oxford team led by Sarah Gilbert developed an early vaccine against COVID-19 in collaboration with AstraZeneca.

Britain's contribution extends further. UK universities were central to helping define global and European higher education. In 1913, the Association of Commonwealth Universities was established to ensure communication between universities within the British empire beyond independence and critically beyond borders.<sup>1</sup> It was followed in 1930 by the formation of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, predecessor to Universities UK (UUK), established in 2000.

In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, Winston Churchill appealed for the rebuilding of a 'network of knowledge and know-how on a European scale'. The Hague Congress on European Cooperation in 1948 led to the formation of the College of Europe in Bruges, the European Cultural Centre in Geneva, the European Cultural Foundation and CERN.

In 1952 the first talks were held between ministers and universities of five European countries – the UK, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Three years later, the University of Cambridge hosted a conference considered

as the first General Assembly of the Standing Conference of European Rectors (CRE). CRE was formally established in 1959 on an initiative of the Council of Europe.

The Sorbonne Declaration was initiated by education ministers from the UK, Germany, France and Italy in 1998. It laid the groundwork for the Bologna Process which has become the defining project of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). With its birth, there was a recognised need for European higher education to speak as one voice, prompting the formation of the European University Association (EUA) in 2001.

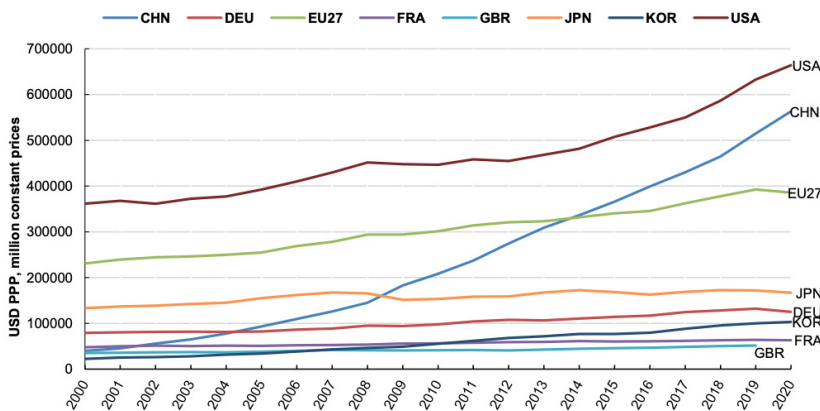
The UK also played a formative role in helping set standards for quality assurance and transforming an 'informal discussion forum of quality enthusiasts into a professional cross-European association' called ENQA – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. As Peter Williams has also noted, it was important for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) – founded in 1997 – to 'have an international network to explore quality benchmarking', which in turn has been instrumental in the creation of UK-wide benchmarks for quality and standards.<sup>2</sup> It was in this context that the QAA participated in the development of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* in 2005. UK academics and higher education leaders have held senior positions in both EUA and ENQA.

## **Geopolitics of rankings**

Universities and university organisations are strategic global actors. Notwithstanding criticisms of globalisation, science, technology & innovation performance and reputation sit

at the fulcrum of a geopolitical struggle for a greater share of the global market and the emerging new world-order. Previous decades saw the US, Japan and the EU dominate science and technology research. Over the last two decades, China's technological leadership has risen most particularly in 5G, batteries and photovoltaics, creating three distinct power blocs: the US, China and the EU. In contrast to its historical accomplishments, the UK sits at the bottom of the graph; indeed, in the 2023 iteration, it no longer appears.<sup>3</sup>

*Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D, Selected Economies, 2000-2021<sup>4</sup>*



These changing geopolitical dynamics are evident also in global rankings. Despite criticism of global university rankings, they are widely used by governments, universities and students, other stakeholders and the media because they tell a complex story simply. Arguably, they tell us something about the competitive advantages of our institutions and our nations. The table illustrates very well the changing global landscape, and positioning of countries.

*ARWU distribution of select universities in the top 20 – top 500 by country, 2004 and 2022<sup>5</sup>*

Country	Top 20		Top 100		Top 500	
	2003	2022	2003	2022	2003	2022
United States	15	15	58	39	161	127
United Kingdom	3	3	9	8	42	38
Japan	1	—	5	2	36	13
Germany	—	—	5	4	43	31
France	—	1	2	4	22	16
Australia	—	—	2	7	13	24
Russia	—	—	—	—	2	2
China	—	—	—	9	19	83
• Mainland	—	—	—	8	9	71
• Taiwan	—	—	—	—	5	6
• Hong Kong	—	—	—	1	5	5
• Macau	—	—	—	—	—	1

In 2003, the year ARWU first emerged on the world stage, the US and Europe dominated global rankings. Most notable over the years has been China's ascent. Mainland China had no universities in the top 100 in 2003, compared with 58 for the United States and nine for the UK. By 2022, mainland China and the UK both had eight universities in the top 100.

The position of individual universities and countries may change over time depending upon which ranking is employed but the message is consistent. The increasing number of countries now appearing in global rankings – rising from 39 in 2003 to 64 in 2022 – illustrates the multi-polarity of global science. It also highlights the relative decline of the UK – and

US – telling us almost everything we need to know about geopolitical tensions today.

Key to these outcomes is international collaboration which is the defining feature of the new global geography of science. It has become synonymous with excellent research and heightened citation impact. Networks and associations are a vital means for encouraging and supporting collaboration and scientific migration flows. Yet even here, there is evidence of the world order shifting. These networks have been dominated and led by top universities from the global north. The formation of the Asian Universities Alliance in 2017, bringing together 15 universities from 14 Asian and Middle Eastern and North African countries and conspicuously excluding Australia and New Zealand, underscores the changing landscape.

Finally, while collaboration has been rising between OECD countries and China, ideological and policy decisions and geopolitical tensions are beginning to limit and / or reshape partnerships. Both the US and UK show an outflow of talent by Chinese and EU citizens, who are finding their own countries more attractive. While international student numbers to the UK – especially for the top-ranked universities – are increasing, a key figure to watch is visa applications from international researchers and this is declining post-Brexit.

### **Europe's strategy for universities and research**

In response to changing geopolitical dynamics, the EU put European universities at the heart of its future. In 2022, it published the *European Strategy for Universities* and the *Council Recommendation on Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation*.<sup>6</sup>



The European Universities Initiative (EUI) – aiming to expand to more than 500 universities by 2024 – is a key pillar progressing transnational cooperation in order to create more globally competitive institutions. Not only is there an emphasis on joint programming and degrees but, in addition to the almost €400 million dedicated to these transnational collaborations, they will also attract priority funding from other initiatives. A similar initiative is in place for Centres of Vocational Excellence. Participants will benefit from an expanded Erasmus+ student and staff mobility scheme.

At €95.5 billion, Horizon Europe is now the largest single research funding programme in the world. But it is more than that; it shares the ambitions of Bologna to create a single borderless European Research Area. It also aims to expand beyond the EU – and has already concluded negotiations with Canada and New Zealand. There is also a programme of multi-lateral workshops and knowledge sharing.

A European Higher Education Sector Observatory will integrate current EU data tools and capacities to provide a comprehensive evidence and research information system as well as an instrument for benchmarking and peer learning. The EU Digital Credentials will enable EU citizens who wish it to store and share their credentials. Linked to the EQAR (European Quality Assurance Registrar), it will provide a quality assurance guarantee for learners, educational providers and employers. It is well aligned with the UN Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications which aims to foster mobility.

These developments may have missed the UK press. But there is little doubt of their significance. At a time when many parts

of the world are embroiled in civil and political unrest – and intellectual and scientific endeavour and academic freedom are being challenged – no more powerful statements about the role and importance of higher education and research have been made to date by any country or region. They also speak loudly to the EU's global ambition.

### **What are the implications for 'global Britain'?**

While the UK has heretofore been an active participant across Europe and beyond, Brexit means that it now sits somewhat estranged.

In addition to the issues raised above, evidence of a shift in fortunes is also visible in research funding. British universities were one of the largest recipients of EU research funding.<sup>7</sup> However between 2017 to 2020, the UK dropped from its longstanding joint first to fifth place. By 2020, the UK had won less money and participated in fewer projects than Germany, France, Spain and Italy, and was only just ahead of the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> The redistribution of funding to other member states has been warmly welcomed. It speaks to concerns about over-concentration of research funding and regional disparities – and will be hard to reverse even if / when associate arrangements are agreed.

The UK proposes to replace Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ with Pioneer and Turing, respectively, but neither have the scale or ambition of the EU schemes. The £110 million annual budget for Turing is substantially less than the €26.2 billion Erasmus+ from 2021 to 2027.<sup>9</sup> It also compares less favourably with Germany which had €634.7 million available for its mobility programmes in 2021, in addition to Erasmus+.<sup>10</sup>

While these disparities are often dismissed on the basis that the EU accounted for only 3% of total UK research funding, it is not just the money that is significant. As discussed, the value of partnerships with other leading intellectual and scientific talent, the opportunity to participate in ground-breaking research and innovation and wide-ranging academic and student mobility opportunities within and beyond the EU are incalculable. Also valuable is having a place at the table for wide-ranging policy discussions and the opportunity to help shape the direction of those policies. Despite a lot of nonsense spoken about EU bureaucracy, the EU works via the open method of co-ordination. Higher education institutions and their representative organisations and member states are consulted and participate in a way not readily practised by many national governments. Students have an obligatory seat at the table.

Another chasm has opened around quality assurance, specifically between the QAA and the Office for Students. The UK regulatory system does not require publication of institutional reviews, involvement of students on review teams or a cyclical review process. Effectively having a quality assurance system which is seen to be non-compliant with internationally expected standards of independent monitoring threatens the standing of UK universities worldwide.<sup>11</sup> This carries huge potential implications for the recruitment of international students and transnational education between English universities and overseas partners.

It is also worth noting the UK has not wholly embraced the expectations of Bologna despite being one of the initiating countries. That it operated a clearly defined BA / MA / PhD framework enabled it to think it was always Bologna compliant.

But noticeably the UK has never fully embraced the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which enables student mobility, preferring its own formulation. European Digital Credentials are likely to widen the gap further.

These developments reflect an existential divergence between the UK – and England in particular – and the EU especially around values and policy direction. Emphasis on a marketised approach to higher education – what one observer calls ‘selling the student experience’ – is fundamentally contrary to the European view of higher education as a public good.

The above-mentioned tensions have exacerbated growing differences between the devolved nations, particularly around policy goals and value systems, and relations with the EU. Both Wales and Scotland have been actively promoting a tertiary education perspective, aiming to create a much more learner-centred and value-driven educational system. The former is currently establishing a new Commission on Tertiary Education and Research – based on a study I conducted in 2015 – while the Scottish Funding Council is advancing its ‘strategic, longer-term vision and intent for the future of tertiary education and research’.<sup>12</sup> Wales is to be congratulated for the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) which sets out the visions and values required to underpin all legislation and initiatives. Critically, it is not just nice words; they have a Future Generations Commissioner to oversee compliance.

Geopolitical tensions are challenging trade, technology and supply chains across the world. Demographic shifts, migration, climate change and the changing world of work are undermining the social contract and trust at a global and

national level. Many of the values which have been core to higher education over the centuries are being questioned. The UK has a tremendous contribution to make to help in solving many of the world's societal challenges. Unfortunately, at a time when adherence to the principles of internationalisation, collaboration and scientific exchange is so badly needed, the UK appears to have decided to exit the world stage. Time for a rethink? If so, is there a role here for HEPI?

## Notes

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## **13. The next 20 years – rediscovering the social purpose of higher education**

**Jonathan Grant**

In his book, *The Living Company*, Arie de Gues observes that most companies either go bust or are acquired within their first 50 years of existence and that it is a rarity for companies to survive for over a century let alone 200 or 300 years.<sup>1</sup> He wanted to understand the characteristics of companies that did survive this long and identified four key characteristics: they were sensitive to their environment; they had a strong sense of identity; they were tolerant; and they were conservative in their financing. In reading HEPI's twentieth anniversary report, I found myself reflecting on these characteristics. Clearly not all universities in the UK are over 100 years old but they seem solidly to meet these criteria.

In this final essay, I want to draw on the lessons of the last 20 years to gaze into the crystal ball to think about the next 20. The diversity of topics covered in the preceding 13 pieces is vast and thus difficult to pull out commonalities, but one framing would be around the alliteration of celebration, change and challenge. As we navigate these 'in-between times', we can forget the extraordinary impact that higher education, as a sector, and HEPI, as a think tank, has had over the last 20 years (as Bahram Bekhradnia and Roger Brown recount).<sup>2</sup> During that time, UK universities have grown from graduating almost 600,000 people in 2003, to over 900,000 in 2022.<sup>3</sup> In and of itself that is a considerable achievement as not only has it provided individual enlightenment for many people, but it has contributed to the economic and social wellbeing of the UK and beyond. Put alongside the indisputably impactful

research undertaken in UK universities (as evidenced now by two rounds of REF assessment), and the unique contributions universities made to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is hard not to feel immense pride in the sector. More recently, and perhaps spurred by macro-political concerns around levelling up, we have seen many universities (re)discover their commitment to their locality, embracing the idea of being anchor institutions through civic and community engagement.

As these institutions go on to deliver on these three missions, HEPI sat alongside them celebrating their success, but also challenging universities to think about their responsibilities through analysis and advocacy. Through their many hundreds of reports and events, HEPI has shaped a more robust and evidence-based debate around higher education for two decades. Counterfactual arguments can, at times, be puerile, but it is worth reflecting on how the sector would be without HEPI or at least a think tank that is focused on higher education.

But in celebrating these successes we should not lose sight of the changes that have occurred, nor the challenges that are faced today. As Mark Corver points out, the two biggest trends over the past 20 years go hand-in-hand – that is increased participation in higher education with the need to share the costs of tuition. Sometimes, in debating the fee structures in the UK we forget the primary driver which is the increase in the number of people going to universities. During HEPI's lifetime, this has increased from 42% in 2006/07 to 52% in 2019/20, meeting the 1999 50% aspiration of Tony Blair's Labour Government but more importantly transforming the lives of many millions of young people. But that change could not have been afforded solely by the state meaning that, in some form, the costs of a university education had in part to



be met by individual students. The debate therefore is what is the 'form' and what is the 'part'. Currently, as Claire Callender describes, with the exception of Scotland, we have income-contingent fee loans with the variables of income thresholds, interest rates and duration being used to determine the balance between public and private contributions.

This quite radical shift has had a number of consequences (some I suspect unintended). For example, as Chris Millward points out it has reduced the levers that central government has over universities, which may explain some of the frustrations that governments seem to have with the sector (ie they have lost control). This has resulted in a shift to a regulated system in governance with a more corporate model being adopted by many universities as Michael Shattock explains, leading to a focus on 'customers' ie students, a realisation of the need to improve teaching in many parts of the sector, highlighted by Alex Bols and Graeme Wise, and the introduction of new staffing models, which Celia Whitchurch outlines. The knock-on consequences of these changes (which are often loosely packaged as 'marketisation') have had at times stretched to breaking point the higher education system in the UK, as evidenced by recent industrial disputes, negative newspaper headlines over a range of topics and local conflicts around issues such as housing. On the latter point, William Whyte provides a history of the positive and negative impacts of universities on their communities, including the rediscovery of their civic roles.

Concurrent with these inwards facing trends, the sector has had to contend with a number of external changes such as devolution. Additionally, and as Ellen Hazelkorn describes, the nexus of Brexit and 'Global Britain' have had profound effects on the sector (again for good or bad) and others which

are slightly under the radar (for example, at least in England, the separation of further education and higher education as Andrea Laczik and Josh Patel describe).

The one area that has witnessed gentle change is perhaps research as David Sweeney argues but even here there has been a quiet evolution with a focus on application (impact), concentration of activity in universities and more recently the emergence of a number of interconnected concerns that are packaged as 'research culture'. On this last point it is curious that today it is often the research funders (for example, the Wellcome Trust leading on research culture) which hold the policy levers that Chris Millward notes are largely absent for central government. Furthermore, they are using that power to create change that arguably is the responsibility of universities and the sector more broadly.

And that is a nice segue into my final 'C' – challenges. At times I suspect they can be overwhelming for many senior leaders in universities. The list is long and (in policy jargon) 'wicked', that is there are no easy solutions, whether it is: adaptation to climate change (international students and academic travel); the emergence of new technologies (AI being the go-to example); the precarious state of both the universities' workforce and its overall finances; student mental health and wellbeing; or the 'populism, polarisation and post truth' of the culture wars.<sup>4</sup> Who would want to be a vice-chancellor? The good news, however, is that – firstly – if any sector can navigate these issues, it is surely universities with their intellectual heft and that, as seen, they possess the characteristics of the 'living company', giving confidence in their long-term survival.

Looking into the crystal ball, what will the fortieth anniversary

report by HEPI focus on? Clearly prediction is a fools-game, but there do seem persistent issues that, if resolved, would shape the direction of travel. On that basis two plausible scenarios come to mind. The first is a positive re-articulation of the social purpose of higher education and the second is more a muddling through scenario (much like the recent past). I thought about, and rejected, the doom and gloom narrative that universities enter a perpetual decline, given their history of resilience and adaptability. I hope I am not being complacent.

So my muddling through scenario assumes that the trends of HEPI's teenage years continue into its early 20s. That is that issues around fee structures, cross-subsidies, purpose and mission remain largely unsolved. The higher education sector and government continue to grind along, never quite falling in love but neither engaging in outright warfare. Despite political and popular concern around immigration, international students will continue to fund research deficits and further education will remain as the poor cousin to higher education. Research culture, precarity and staffing models will continue to be debated but without much meaningful change.

This might sound a bit too much like the 'doom and gloom' scenario I rejected, but it is basically the status quo. And it is not all bad; student lives will still be transformed through higher education, research will continue to make meaningful contributions to society, not least to some of the existential challenges we face like the climate crisis, and universities will continue to strengthen their connections to their place.

I also think this is quite a likely scenario (at least for the next five to 10 years): if the Labour Party manage to form a government after the next election, then I suspect they will commission (yet another) review, partly as a tactic to kick higher education into

the long grass. If I were advising party leader Keir Starmer this is what I would do as, basically, he will be facing more pressing priorities. If the Conservatives form the government there is nothing to suggest a change from the current approach, except perhaps a gentle shift away from the cultural wars to something more technocratic.

There are many good reasons to be cynical about 'another review' but in the vein of optimism, let us see that as a launch-pad for a new or re-discovered social purpose for higher education. Taking another leaf out of the Australian policy book, perhaps this will result in an 'accord', or new social contract, between universities and society mediated through local and national government.<sup>5</sup> Such a vision could articulate why universities are so critical to the success of the UK and identify a number of forward-looking aspirations for the sector and government to work on and deliver together. Some of this could be re-purposing tired slogans (like 'Science Superpower') but backing them up with meaningful policies around sustainable funding, Horizon (and beyond) and people (visas, postgraduate training and a reputation that the UK is a welcoming place to live and work). But other proposals could be more radical, for example, setting a new aspiration that 70% of young people will go to university by 2035. This is a position that HEPI Director Nick Hillman has advanced and something I firmly align with as it will benefit both society and the individual.<sup>6</sup> In return, universities could commit to being the catalyst of sustainable economic growth, both nationally but also in their locality. This would mean taking seriously their civic and community responsibilities by buying locally, being cognisant of their impact on local communities (for example, on housing) and paying a living wage.

None of this, it has to be said, is all that radical but by capturing it in an accord between the sector and government it would have strong symbolic power, allow society to hold universities to account and legitimise the role of higher education following a period when its reputation has been tarnished through a range of issues such as on free speech, 'fat cat' salaries and marking boycotts. However, there could be radical consequences. For example, increasing participation to 70% is likely to require investment in half a dozen new universities. This would create an opportunity to fill in higher education cold spots, which could be ambitiously modelled on the US land-grant universities of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

However, such an aspiration will not be met until the debate over student funding is once again settled. As noted above, increased participation in higher education means that its costs have to be shared between the individual and the state – and potentially employers. To me that is undisputable, so then the debate becomes a technical one on how best to share those costs and whether such a system should be progressive, regressive or neutral when looking at the background of prospective students.

At the same time, universities could learn from the health sector in establishing something akin to academic health sciences centres or networks, where they partner with further education institutions and other schools and colleges in their districts to deliver locally relevant educational pathways (a bit like the recent announcement by the Mayor of Greater Manchester).<sup>8</sup> Finally, UKRI and other government departments could deliver on the old promise of moving to 100% full economic costs.<sup>9</sup> Not only would this create a sustainable research funding environment, but it would shift the motive for international

student recruitment from one of needing cash to one of creating a culturally diverse educational experience.

The combination of a new accord, the continued expansion of the sector, a change of motivation for international student recruitment, a shift to fully funding research, a recalibration of the student fee regime and a purpose focused on educational systems embedded in localities, could mean that the scale of change of the last 20 years is mirrored in the next 20. It seems to me, as we reflect on the optimism that characterised HEPI's early years and how, to a degree, that has declined, we need to rediscover a vision that can be energising and purposeful. Such a vision for universities was captured succinctly by the former president of the University of Pennsylvania, Amy Gutmann: 'A university is, first and foremost, a social undertaking to create social good'.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

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## **Afterword: Looking back and looking forwards**

**Nick Hillman**

Since HEPI was founded in 2002, it has published 160 Reports (blue books), 48 Policy Notes and 32 Debate Papers (red books, but originally yellow Occasional Papers) as well as over 1,500 blog posts.

This is not anything like a complete record because some of HEPI's written output, including many of the most substantial pieces, have been one-off projects. In the month of May 2023, for example, we produced a detailed report with Universities UK, Kaplan and London Economics on the economic contribution of international students as well as a lengthy report with SUMS on how the terms and conditions for academics compare to those of other professionals. In June, we published the 2023 iteration of the *Student Academic Experience Survey* with Advance HE, which is rightly regarded as a flagship.

In the last two decades, we have also hosted hundreds of events, ranging from our large Annual Conference, regular Annual Lectures and a biennial research conference (in conjunction with Elsevier, the sponsors of this collection), through expert policy seminars and webinars on specific issues to regular small dinners enabling us to delve more deeply into issues in a more private setting. In the last five years alone, we have hosted around 100 events – despite the pandemic making planning more difficult than ever for much of the period in question.

None of this would have been possible without the support of our University Partners and our corporate Partners, currently



numbering 136 higher education institutions (listed on the HEPI website) and 18 corporations (listed inside the back cover as well as on our website). In addition to funding HEPI's work, the Partners help to inform our output – I often remark that HEPI is only ever as good as the intelligence it picks up from those with whom we work. It is also worth noting the constant contribution of *Times Higher Education* and *Research Fortnight* to HEPI's impact over the whole of the past 20 years. Along with many education journalists at national and local media outlets, they have been crucial in bringing our work to a wider audience. As a sector, we have been blessed to have had such good specialist journalists.

Over the 20 years since HEPI was founded in the circumstances so vividly described by Bahram Bekhradnia and Roger Brown in the preceding pages, engagement with the organisation's work has grown enormously. Growth was gradual but consistent until the COVID pandemic began, at which point HEPI faced some unprecedented challenges but also saw a particularly sharp increase in engagement – perhaps because people were spending longer in front of their screens and there were new educational challenges to consider.

Despite our expectations, this greater impact did not reverse once COVID began to dissipate and, today, our influence is continuing to climb. In 2023, we expect to have nearly a million website hits (despite the fact that most people read our new output via daily emails – or even via our hard copy publications – rather than on the website). In part, this increase in engagement with HEPI is to do with a rising volume of output – in the academic year of 2022/23, we published more than ever before. But it also reflects the pace of policy – since 2014 alone, when I became the Director, there have been 10

Secretaries of State for Education at Westminster, three general elections, two referenda (in Scotland and on Brexit), multiple pieces of major new legislation affecting higher education institutions and students, the establishment of UK Research and Innovation and, in England, a new overarching regulator in the Office for Students.

HEPI is proudly UK-wide in its approach and the pace of change has been rapid in recent years across England, Scotland and Wales. Political stasis in Northern Ireland has perhaps meant less change there, but it has not stopped lively debate over how to ensure Northern Ireland secures more student places as well as a more sustainable funding system.

On a number of occasions, HEPI's work has been recognised via awards from others, perhaps most notably winning the One to Watch Award in the *Prospect* Think Tank of the Year Awards as well as being shortlisted in two other categories alongside much larger organisations. Despite this record of achievement and our future ambitions, HEPI is – and may well remain – a small organisation. It has always had fewer than five full-time equivalent members of staff and, for much of its life, has had only around half this level of staffing.

This small size comes with important challenges; every member of staff has to display cross-cutting skills and to muck in. But it also brings opportunities because we can act more nimbly than larger organisations. For example, a request from a journalist for a comment from a vice-chancellor may have to go through a big university press office and any response may take too long and be filtered too much, making it too slow and too anodyne for the media to use. In contrast, HEPI has no press office and the policy team will speak immediately and directly to the media as soon as a request comes in.

Being small also forces us to work in partnership with other organisations, which is a boon. Instead of thinking we could write most of our reports in-house, as a much larger think tank might feel compelled to do, we tend to reach out to experts elsewhere on whatever the issue is at hand. That is why our roster of authors has been so diverse over the years.

HEPI is completely reliant on its small staff team and the organisation has been blessed with some exceptional staff over the years. Clearly, HEPI would never have got off the ground without Bahram's ideas, expertise and wisdom and he was supported in his role as Director by his very efficient wife Jean.

While it is invidious to pick out just a few other people to namecheck, in HEPI's early days its core contributors included Tom Sastry, now Head of Sustainability at Research England, and Libby Aston (now Libby Hackett), who went on to found the University Alliance before later moving abroad to work with the higher education sector in Australia, where she is now the inaugural CEO of the James Martin Institute for Public Policy.

As Bahram notes in the Foreword, Sarah Isles, HEPI's Development Director from 2008, helped engineer the shift from HEPI being funded by HEFCE to financial independence, via the establishment of a University Partnership programme and a corporate Partnership programme.

Today, HEPI's experienced Director of Partnerships, Lucy Haire, has further broadened and deepened our relationships with others to such a degree that, in this year of our 20th birthday and despite the heightened sense of political and

financial uncertainty, we have more Partners, more University Partners and more projects on the go than ever before. As an experienced educator herself, Lucy has also increasingly contributed to HEPI's policy work.

In recent times, we have beefed up our policy team, with a new Director of Policy and Advocacy role being instituted in 2017. This has since been filled by exceptional women, including: Dr Diana Beech (now CEO of London Higher); Rachel Hewitt (now CEO of MillionPlus); and, since early 2023, Rose Stephenson (who came to HEPI from her role as Project and Policy Manager at the University of Bath). HEPI's policy team has also been boosted in recent times by a Policy Manager position, a role first carved out by Hugo Dale-Rivas, who was followed by Michael Natzler and then by Dr Laura Brassington and, from July 2023, by Josh Freeman.

Over the years, we have also welcomed a stream of (paid) interns, who have helped ensure HEPI's output has reflected the experience of contemporary student life. All of them have contributed to our output in important ways. One of our interns, Vicky Olive, won an award for her research from the hard-to-please folk at Wonkhe while a number have gone on to successful careers in education and policymaking, including Alice Rubba (now Head of Skills Strategy at the Department for Education) and Bethan Cornell (until recently Senior Private Secretary to the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education and now working for the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology). Other interns who made an important contribution to HEPI's work over the years before moving upwards in their careers include: Nicholas Robinson; Poppy Brown, Charlotte Freitag; Megan Bowler; and Mia Liyanage.

Given that two of HEPI's Policy Managers started off as interns, the programme has been a good source of new staff for HEPI itself too. So if we at HEPI have any influence over such things, I urge other organisations to ensure that internships are always properly paid: you lose out on exceptional talent (and risk breaking the law) if you insist that any team members should work for free.

The whole HEPI team is also very grateful to Tony Bruce, a former head of policy for the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, who not only authored a HEPI report over a decade ago but has – for many years – written HEPI's termly Policy Briefing Paper. This has proved a particularly useful resource for lay governors, senior managers and student representatives. It is as important to our success as much of our more public-facing work.

When it comes to HEPI staff, a special mention must be reserved for Emma Ma. Emma joined HEPI in 2015 from Oxford University Press, initially as an Executive Assistant but since rising to become the Head of Events, Publications and Operations. As anyone who engages with HEPI knows, Emma is often the first point of contact, and an unfailingly helpful one, and she also holds much of the organisation's institutional memory. For me as Director, she has long been the keystone of the team and I personally owe her a special debt of gratitude. To the degree in which HEPI has been successful in recent years, much of the credit rests on Emma's shoulders.

I also want to note the support HEPI has received from its four Chairs. The inaugural Chair was Baron (Ron) Dearing, who will always be remembered as a key architect of the UK higher education system after his seminal report of 1997. He was

followed by Professor Sir Graeme Davies (2005-2015), Professor Sir Ivor Crewe (2015-2021) and, most recently, Professor Dame Sally Mapstone (2021 onwards). The role of Chair is an interesting but somewhat time-consuming voluntary position, yet it is vitally important given the legal duties of any charity's Trustees and also for holding the whole HEPI staff team, including the Director, to account for their day-to-day activities.

Over the past 20 years, numerous experienced and high-profile people have supported the Chair and HEPI's staff by serving as HEPI Trustees and Advisory Board members. At the time of writing, HEPI's Trustees are: Sir David Bell; Mary Curnock Cook CBE; Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow; and Professor Dame Helen Wallace. The Advisory Board members are: Alison Allden OBE; Professor Carl Lygo; Professor Nick Pearce; Professor Iyiola Solanke; and Professor David Sweeney CBE.

HEPI has always sought to be more transparent on its funding and more independent in its approach than most other think tanks. We regard both these features as critical to our past and future longevity. The influence of many think tanks waxes and wanes according to the political weather and changing fads. But being transparent, independent and specialist has helped to build trust in HEPI's work across the board. Our goals remain to be respected across the political spectrum for speaking truth unto power and to be an important part of the higher education policymaking ecosystem, both of which we have sought to do every day since we were first founded.

This collection marks HEPI's twentieth anniversary but it would be wrong to bring it to a close without mentioning another important milestone: the sixtieth anniversary of the Robbins report.

From today's perspective, the most striking thing about the Robbins report is how much has changed. When the report came out, there were 321,000 students in UK higher education, three-quarters of whom were men. There were just 31 universities (including seven new ones). In 2023, after the Dearing (1997), Browne (2010) and Augar (2019) reports as well as the older Robbins report, the number of students is nearly ten times larger, at 2.9 million. While men still outnumber women in the higher echelons of universities, among students women outnumber men to such a degree that male educational underachievement is now a pressing social problem (and one on which HEPI has – controversially – published more than most). Today, there are over five times as many (160) universities as in 1963, not to mention hundreds of other higher education institutions.

Despite this extraordinary societal achievement, many people think we are now at a fork in the road. Should the different parts of the UK continue striving for expansion, aiming at providing higher education places to 'all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so', in line with the famous 'Robbins Principle'? Or is it time to veer off in another direction, perhaps by boosting vocational education while capping places on routes regarded as academic?

In his famous 'more-will-mean-worse' piece opposing the expansion of higher education, Kingsley Amis said university graduates resembled 'poems or bottles of hock' and were 'unlike cars or tins of salmon', before concluding 'you cannot decide to have more good ones.' This is patently false. Demand for graduates has not declined as the number of students has gone up. The OECD has shown that, across the world, there

is no natural limit on demand for graduates, nor is there any natural limit on demand from people to better themselves through higher level study.

Policymakers expect a renewed focus on quality and want to know higher education courses are delivering for students and employers. They also often remark, correctly, that there have not been enough good alternatives to full-time residential three-year honours degrees for those who want to learn on the job, or study part-time or enrol as mature students. But it does not automatically follow that we must be at a fork in the road.

There are not really two alternative routes, one marked 'better vocational education' and one marked 'more academic education'. The word 'higher' in 'higher education' – and in HEPI's own name – refers to the *level* of education, not the *type* of education; it is not a signifier of whether something is vocational or academic.

So the so-called alternatives to traditional higher education are actually generally just different routes to the same sort of goals: degree apprenticeships are still degrees, for example.

The question staring us in the face as we look towards HEPI's next 20 years is not therefore: should we limit higher education to boost further education? It is: do we want more education at higher levels or not? To me, the answer is an unequivocal yes, given rising life expectancy over recent decades and the skills shortfall that is plaguing employers. Twenty years after HEPI was founded and 60 years on from the publication of the Robbins report, is it time to adopt something akin to that report's educational ambitions for the next 30 years, taking us to the middle of the twenty-first century?



As we approach the sixth general election since HEPI's foundation and notwithstanding the fact that HEPI is a think tank rather than a lobby group, it is worth noting that the evidence HEPI has marshalled over the years suggests all political parties would be wise to adopt policies that recognise the potential of higher education institutions to contribute to the greater good. It is hard, perhaps nigh on impossible, to achieve the priorities of all the major political parties – goals like quicker economic growth, fewer skills gaps and a stronger society – without universities playing a major part in terms of education, research and civic engagement.

The alternative approach, one of holding down the financial resources for teaching and research, further entangling higher education institutions in divisive culture wars and blocking the unprecedented levels of educational aspirations within families up and down the UK, would likely prove a poor electoral, educational and economic strategy.

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