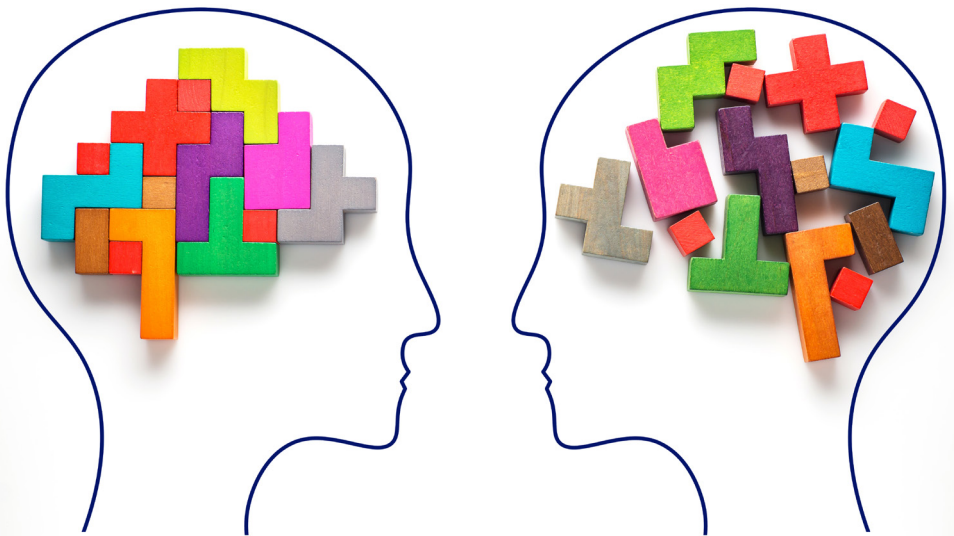


**HEPI DEBATE PAPER 34**

# **Neoliberal or not? English higher education**

**Roger Brown and Nick Hillman**  
**With a Foreword by Chris Husbands**



**hepi**

## About the authors

**Roger Brown** is the former Vice-Chancellor of Solent University, now Professor Emeritus. His initial work on higher education policy was for a doctoral study of the post-war planning of further and higher education by the London County Council and the Inner London Education Authority (of which he was then an administrative officer). He subsequently worked at the Department of Trade and Industry, the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council, the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the Higher Education Quality Council. From 2007 to 2013, he was Professor of Higher Education Policy at Liverpool Hope University and he was a governor of the University of West London from 2013 to 2019. He was involved in the establishment of HEPI, was a long-serving member of the Advisory Board and has authored several HEPI reports. He has written or edited several books on various aspects of higher education policy as well as political economy more generally.

**Nick Hillman** has been the Director of HEPI since January 2014 and was previously the Special Adviser to the Minister for Universities and Science. Before that, he worked at the Association of British Insurers and as a History teacher. He has written numerous think-tank papers on contemporary higher education challenges as well as articles for academic journals on post-war education policy. His most recent HEPI papers are: *'You can't say that!' What students really think of free speech on campus* (2022); *'Not heard of this': Employers' perceptions of the UK's Graduate Route visa* (2023); and *The Robbins Report at 60: Essential facts for policymakers today* (2023).

The image shown on page 42 is by Andrew Moss (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/andymoss461/>).

*HEPI Debate Papers are designed to stimulate informed conversations about topical issues. They do not represent a fixed HEPI position.*

## Foreword

**By Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor  
of Sheffield Hallam University**

In this HEPI Debate, Roger Brown and Nick Hillman explore, from quite different perspectives, one of the most widely argued concepts in twenty-first century higher education.

'Neoliberalism' is variously an economic theory, a tool in political analysis, a rallying-cry slogan and a social media term of abuse. Gary Gerstle's recent, and comprehensive account of the 'rise and fall of the neoliberal order' describes it as a rejection of the New Deal's Keynesian belief in the power of an assertive state to govern the economic system in the public interest. By contrast, during the 1980s and 1990s the 'neoliberal order was grounded in the belief that market forces had to be liberated from government regulatory controls that were stymieing growth, innovation and freedom'.

Gerstle argues that neoliberal ideas were incubated throughout the post-war period, promoted by the Mont Pèlerin Society established by, among others, Friedrich Hayek. Throughout the post-war period, it was Hayek who elaborated a theoretical case for unregulated markets and the minimalist state. The political and economic stagnation which followed the 1973 oil price shock created an opportunity for these largely economic ideas to leap into the political domain. Deployed in the United States under Ronald Reagan and taken up rapidly by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, neoliberal ideas shaped public policy in the 1980s, and were also highly influential in the economic policies of Bill Clinton's Democratic presidency and Tony Blair's New Labour administration. This is Gerstle's concept of a 'political order' – a 'distinctive paradigm of political economy' which reaches beyond the political programmes of individual parties.

In this HEPI Debate Paper, Roger Brown argues that the neoliberal political order shaped higher education policies decisively in the United Kingdom from the later 1980s. A largely publicly managed system of different institutions – universities, polytechnics, colleges of higher education, Colleges of Advanced Technology – was, according to Brown’s argument, remade as a competitive space in which economic power increasingly dominated. For Brown, the neoliberal remaking of higher education is the theme which underpins policy throughout the thirty years following the Education Reform Act (1988).

The expansion of higher education in the face of rapidly rising demand was also characterised by increased competition, deregulation and more sharply defined hierarchy. These were key concepts in higher education policy for the Thatcher and Major Conservative Governments, the New Labour Governments of Brown and Blair and Cameron’s Coalition Government. The 2012 fee settlement for higher education, in which virtually the entire cost of higher education participation was passed to the student / graduate was, on Brown’s analysis, the culmination of a long-term policy drift – the embedding of the neoliberal order in higher education policy, bringing universities sharply into a competitive market place.

Nick Hillman addresses the concept and the underlying ideas of neoliberalism from a different perspective. Where Brown is concerned with over-arching concepts and the way they shape political ideas, Hillman looks at the often day-to-day choices made by politicians; these were politicians who had a variable grasp of the intricacies of the system they were overseeing, but a keen understanding of economic pressures and the art of the political possible. His is therefore a more fine-grained analysis from the point of view of a key actor in the decisions made in the early 2010s: Hillman was the Special Adviser to the then Minister for Universities and Science (the Rt Hon David Willetts MP) and an architect of the funding system which emerged then. Where Brown reads political

choices as subordinate to powerful overarching ideas, Hillman explores the range of choices which seemed to be available to politicians and the decisions made as a result of short-term political and financial pressures.

The debate is not simply a technical one; it has powerful implications for the unfolding of higher education policy in the years to come. The essence of Gerstle's argument – and the political significance of what is a magnificent historical analysis – is that in the second decade of the twenty-first century the neoliberal political order collapsed, brought down by the long-term consequences of the economic crisis of 2007 to 2009 and the challenges it posed for political parties of both left and right and for political philosophy.

It is by no means clear, as 'political disorder and uncertainty reign' what comes next. If Roger Brown's argument is right, higher education policy will need a new paradigm, and one which is as yet undefined. If Hillman's argument is right, the existing paradigm may be adaptable and malleable as old and new political and economic ideas clash for supremacy.



## Contents

### Part One

Neoliberalism in UK higher education: The English higher education neo-market by Roger Brown	8
---	---

### Part Two

Neoliberalism in UK higher education: Response to Roger Brown by Nick Hillman	33
--	----

## Part One

### Neoliberalism in UK higher education: The English higher education neo-market

Roger Brown

*I am clear that it is now more important than ever for students to pursue HE studies which are in their own best interest, and that of the wider economy. The courses they undertake should give them the skills they need to secure gainful employment, supporting a high-wage high-skill economy.*

Guidance Letter from the Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, to the Chair of the Office for Students, Lord Wharton of Yarm, 30

March 2023

*Higher education is a process masquerading as an outcome.*

Martin Trow, 1992

## Introduction

It is now generally accepted that over the past 35 years or so English higher education has undergone a prolonged process of partial 'marketisation': 'the application of the economic theory of the market to the provision of higher education'.<sup>1</sup> This paper argues that the reforms of English higher education since the late 1980s represent an almost textbook case of an attempt to apply neoliberal principles to higher education, and that they can be expected to have a broadly similar impact to that of neoliberal policies on society more generally.<sup>2</sup>

The paper begins by describing how the organisation of the demand and supply of higher education in England has come to have some of the features of an economic market. It then introduces the core principles of neoliberalism before identifying consumer information, privatisation, (de)regulation and 'user pays' as key aspects of what is here called a 'neo-market'. The paper concludes that, on the basis of what is known about the impact of



neoliberalism more generally, the consequences of the reforms will include increased institutional stratification, the commodification of learning and (for some groups) reduced participation, or at least lower levels of participation than might otherwise have been the case.

It should be noted that the author claims no originality for this argument. As Simon Marginson (2013, p.353) says:

*Policy-making is typically informed by a leading family of ideas that frame, articulate and populate government. Policy-making is iterative and reproductive on the basis of the dominant ideas which become institutionalised over time. These ideas remain ascendant until displaced by another family of ideas, mostly during or following a crisis.<sup>3</sup>*

### **Attempting marketisation in England**

The following have in the author's view been the key steps to date:

1. The introduction from 1990 of 'top-up' loans to supplement student maintenance grants.
2. The abolition in 1992 of the 'binary line' separating the existing universities from what used to be called the 'public' sector of higher education. As a result, the 30 polytechnics and some other institutions obtained a University Title and powers to award their own degrees.
3. Following the Dearing Committee report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997), the introduction of 'top-up' tuition fees of £1,000 from 1998.
4. The modification of the rules for University Title in 2004 to enable colleges without the powers to award their own research degrees to become universities (previously, institutions had to possess both Taught and Research Degree-Awarding powers before applying).

5. The introduction in 2006 of 'variable' tuition fees of up to £3,000 with income-based loan repayments levied on earnings over a threshold of £15,000 (with both fee level and threshold rising with inflation).<sup>4</sup>
6. From 2012, and following the Browne Committee report (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010), the raising of the full-time tuition fee to £9,000 and the removal of most direct subsidies (Funding Council grants) for providers' teaching costs. Subsidised loans are available to help students with their tuition and living costs, maintenance grants having been abolished in 2016.
7. The further entry of new providers, including through the relaxation of the rules for Degree-Awarding Powers and University Title. The Office for Students (OfS) Register now lists more than 400 organisations recognised as offering higher education courses in England.<sup>5</sup>
8. In 2015, the final abolition of controls on the number of Home and EU students enrolled by each institution.
9. The establishment in 2018 of a new regulator, the Office for Students.
10. The introduction, also in 2018, by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) of the Teaching Excellence Framework (the TEF) in which each institution is assessed and rated above a set of minimum requirements for quality and standards (for an account of how this has evolved, see Gunn, 2023).
11. The introduction by the OfS in 2022 of numerical thresholds setting 'minimum expectations' for the proportion of students at each institution who continue on their course, graduate and go on to further study or a professional job.

As a result of these changes, the provision of higher education in England now has several market features. In particular:

1. There is considerable competition between institutions for both students and research funds.<sup>6</sup> Students have a wide and genuine choice of providers.
2. There is extensive information for students and their advisers about institutional charges, financial support, quality, access, qualifications and courses.
3. Private support for institutions' teaching costs represents all or a significant share of institutions' funds for teaching. Institutions' funding for teaching is very closely linked to enrolments.
4. There is more open entry to the market, with explicit official encouragement of new providers.

However, this 'neo-market' still falls well short of what a classical economist would call a market:

1. The sector continues to receive considerable quantities of public funds as well as undergoing a fair amount of official 'steering'.<sup>7</sup>
2. What most institutions charge for tuition is still capped by the Government.
3. There is little price competition within the cap.
4. The system is still heavily regulated, indeed more heavily regulated than before the reforms.

Many years ago, Julian Le Grand and Will Bartlett (1993) proposed the use of the term 'quasi-market' to describe the organisation of the supply of collective services on market lines where no or very little private capital was involved, and where the state remains the principal funder and regulator. However, it is not necessary to construct a full market (competition on price and quality, relaxed

market entry and full consumer information) to engender market-like behaviour on the part of institutions, staff, students or the media, and indeed this is what we are now seeing, hence 'neo-market'.<sup>8</sup>

## Neoliberalism

*[M]ore than mere economic policy, neoliberalism is a governing social and political rationality that subjects all human activities, values, institutions, and practices to market principles. It formulates everything in terms of capital investment and appreciation (including and especially humans themselves), whether a teenager building a resume for college, a twenty-something seeking a mate, a working mother returning to school, or a corporation buying carbon offsets. As a governing rationality, neoliberalism extends from the management of the state itself to the soul of the subject; it renders health, education, transportation, nature, and art into individual consumer goods, and converts patients, students, drivers, athletes, and museum-goers alike into entrepreneurs of their own needs and desires who consume or invest in these goods.*

Wendy Brown, 2011, p.118

*The first strategy of reform was to encase free markets in rules governing property and exchange and the circulation of money and credit. Encasement required strong government interventions in economic life, both domestically and internationally. The second strategy was to apply market principles not just to those two areas traditionally identified as market driven (work and production, on the one hand, and income and consumption, on the other), but to all areas of human endeavour.*

Gary Gerstle, 2022, p.88

There does not appear to be any generally accepted definition of neoliberalism.<sup>9</sup> In her most recent book, Wendy Brown (no relation to the author) finds that:

*Neoliberalism is most commonly associated with a bundle of policies privatizing public ownership and services, radically*

*reducing the social state, leashing labour, deregulating capital, and producing a tax- and tariff-friendly climate to direct foreign investors.* (Brown, W., 2019, pp.17-18)

There is a substantial body of writing about the broader impact of neoliberal theories on higher education (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Lynch, 2006, 2015; Connell, 2013, a and b; Choat, 2017; Maisuria and Cole, 2017; Vernon, 2018). The general tenor is indicated by the title of Henry Giroux's 2014 book *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Steven Jones (2022) argues that the impact of the Government's reforms has been reinforced by a broader pro-market discourse associated with the right-wing think tanks and media. Other concerns are that even the present level of competition is making it harder for the universities to act collectively while the emphasis on private returns is weakening public appreciation of the wider benefits of higher education which may in due course lead to those wider benefits being undersupplied – see Holmwood (2011), Newfield (2011), Collini (2012, 2017), McGettigan (2013), Docherty (2014), Smyth (2017, 2020) and Ashwin (2020).

However, bearing in mind the fact that this paper is about *policy*, it is proposed here that neoliberalism embraces the following principles:

1. Markets are far better at generating and allocating resources than governments.
2. Wherever possible, the entities providing goods and services should be privately owned. This is necessary both to increase efficiency and to reduce public expenditure. Where suppliers cannot be privately owned, they should be organised and operated as if they were.
3. Barriers to the free movement of goods, services, capital, people, information, finance and ideas should be reduced to the minimum possible. Businesses should be able to get on with creating wealth with the minimum interference – 'red tape' – in their affairs.

4. Wherever possible, the costs of services should be met by those who use and benefit from them, rather than by the taxpayer: 'user pays'.
5. Social security should provide only a very basic level of protection from ill-health, unemployment and so on. The main purpose of the welfare state should be to incentivise work as the best form of social security.
6. The management of the economy should focus on the control of inflation even at the cost of higher unemployment. The main obstacle to economic growth and innovation is not lack of demand or purchasing power but supply-side inefficiency and lack of producer responsiveness.

## **Discussion**

How far does the organisation of English higher education now reflect these precepts? What consequences can be expected as a result?

On the first question, we look first at consumer information, then at privatisation and regulation and finally at 'user pays'.

### Consumer Information

*That is why we are developing a new Teaching Excellence Framework. It will identify and incentivise the highest quality teaching to drive up standards in higher education, deliver better quality for students and employers and better value for taxpayers. Our aim is to ... help employers to identify and recruit graduates with the skills they require by providing better and clearer information about courses and degree outcomes.*

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015, p.18

*Markets cannot discipline price without meaningful information about quality.*

William Massy, 2004, p.3

*The perfectly informed consumer of economic theory is nowhere to be seen.*

Gordon Winston, 1997, p.15

The central claim for the market as a means of social coordination is that in a complex modern economy only a market – where demand and supply of goods and services are balanced through the price mechanism – can provide the information that consumers and producers require: there simply is no alternative. However, this points to what the author sees as the greatest challenge in applying a market model to higher education: the absence of useful consumer information.<sup>10</sup>

For higher education, the theory of information upon which the whole marketisation case rests would require the following conditions to be met:

1. there is valid and reliable information about the quality of comparable courses and awards (in a subject or discipline and mode) at different institutions;
2. this information is made available to students and their advisers in a timely, accessible and equitable fashion;
3. it is tailored to the interests, wants, needs, resources and circumstances of each individual student;
4. it is balanced, accurate and fair;
5. it is interpreted and acted upon rationally by such users; and
6. it can lead to action by institutions to adjust provision.

The first would require a core curriculum with tests administered by system examiners, something that is almost unimaginable, as well as very questionable, in higher education. But even with that, the information would need to be provided well in advance. Yet higher education is a classic 'post-experience good' where quality can only be established after (and often only years after) the 'product' has been 'consumed' (Weimer and Vining, 1995). Next, it is very hard to see how the information could be adjusted to meet the needs of every student or potential student. Furthermore, markets give both suppliers and purchasers considerable incentives to cheat (Callahan, 2004).<sup>11</sup> There is plenty of evidence that students are no more 'rational' in their decision making than other types of consumer.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the market consumer argument assumes that the student is a passive purchaser when it is a commonplace of the pedagogical literature that students are powerful makers of their own learning as well as that of others (and this should indeed be encouraged).

Absent such information, consumers in higher education behave just like consumers in other markets without direct information about product quality. They find a proxy: institutional status. This in turn tends to be associated with institutional longevity, the level of resourcing and student (and staff) selectivity, all of which interrelate and which the various league tables and rankings reinforce. In such a market, level of resourcing is the key indicator of quality. This explains why – against all official expectations, policy and rhetoric – so few universities or colleges have attempted to compete on price, at least in the undergraduate market. What institutions really compete on is not price or quality but status. (Brown, R., 2014).<sup>13</sup>

### Privatisation

As noted, a substantial share of the financial support for teaching now comes (and will eventually almost all come) from students / graduates and their families. In that sense, our higher education system is already semi-privatised. Institutional ownership is more complicated. While several universities and colleges are genuinely



private – i.e. owned by private individuals or companies – most are independent entities of various kinds, generally charities, effectively neither ‘public’ nor ‘private’. Finally, there can be little doubt that most universities and colleges now operate in revenue-maximising ways that would be very familiar to any private firm, and which have led to numerous complaints of ‘managerialism’ (Deem, 2001).<sup>14</sup>

### Deregulation

Also as already noted, neoliberal theory argues for a reduction in market regulation. Yet in UK higher education the amount of external regulation has steadily increased (Brown, R., 2018; Boggs, 2023). This has had two aspects. First, an increase in the power of external regulators in relation to the – still formally autonomous – institutions. Secondly, an expansion in the number of areas of institutional activity that are subject to such regulation. This has come to rest for the moment with the appointment, under the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (2023), with a Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom. Both aspects have come together in the Office for Students which is modelled on the regulators of the privatised utilities. However, none of this has prevented the agency from being heavily criticised for overreach by the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee (2023).

### User pays

The principle that users of education, rather than the taxpayer, should meet the costs was first enunciated by Milton Friedman. In *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), he argued that to give consumers greater leverage over public schools, and thus improve efficiency and responsiveness, state grants should be replaced by vouchers which families could use to ‘buy’ education from their provider of choice. What we now have in English higher education is a teaching voucher system with which the late Professor would have been delighted.<sup>15</sup>

## Potential Consequences

*The more important point, though, is that, despite the risks associated with any change, the reforms we undertake will improve higher education in the long run. Those institutions which attract more students and pull in businesses seeking to boost the skills of their employees will be able to grow. They will reap the rewards of good teaching that students and employers recognise and value. They will be able to innovate, to make the most of greater autonomy, to pursue their institutional missions, including research.*

The Rt Hon. David Willetts MP, 2010

With Simon Marginson and others, this paper claims that the recognisable neoliberal beliefs described here have played an important part in driving, shaping, or at least informing, the reforms to English higher education since the late 1980s, especially the principles of market operation, consumer information and ‘user pays’. Increased regulation is a direct and unavoidable consequence of the attempt to apply such beliefs to such a complicated ‘product’ as higher education where professional judgements are complex, valid and reliable performance measures are scarce, producers have traditionally had a good deal of autonomy and the ‘market’ and student choice do not always produce the outcomes sought by Ministers. In this final section, we briefly address the question of whether the effects of these reforms on UK higher education will be analogous to those of neoliberal policies across society and the economy generally, as analysed in the present author’s recent work (Brown, R., 2017 and 2022). We look first at stratification, then at commodification, and finally at participation.

### Stratification

*Stratification, the logical outcome of excellence or its absence, now serves as an explicit instrument of public policy rather than reflecting an implicit social perception.*

Guy Neave, 2008, p.18

Between 2013 and 2017, the present author investigated the reasons for the enormous increase in socio-economic inequality and poverty and decline in social mobility in the West, and particularly in the major Anglophone countries, since the mid-80s. The conclusion (Brown, R., 2017) was that this increase was the result of both structural and institutional factors.

The structural factors include globalisation, 'skill-biased technological change', financialisation (with a higher proportion of corporate profits coming through financial channels and a lower proportion from the production and sale of goods and services), changes in the organisation of work (the 'gig economy') and changes in household structures (the rise in the number of single-headed households and the greater likelihood of people choosing partners in the same earnings bracket, which is known as 'assortative mating'). The expansion of higher education was also a contributor because it had increased the divide between those with, and those without, degrees. The institutional causes included the neoliberal policies of marketisation, privatisation, deregulation, tax and welfare reductions, and macroeconomic deflation already adumbrated.

While the interactions between these various factors were complex, it was the institutional ones that had led to some countries – especially the major Anglophone ones, where neoliberal policies had been applied most vigorously under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and their successors – having much greater inequality and poverty and lower social mobility than in comparable others that had been subject to the same structural pressures. This analysis was extended between 2017 and 2022, culminating in Brown, R., 2022.

As well as confirming the earlier conclusion that neoliberal policies had caused, or at least greatly contributed to, the post-1970s rise in inequality and poverty, this analysis suggested that they were the main reason for the slowing of the Western economies after the mid-1970s (including through the weakening of the trades unions and the reduction in real wages) and the much greater incidence of

financial crises – through the deregulation of the financial markets that in turn reflected the political power of finance. The author now considers that neoliberalism essentially provided a smokescreen for the resurgence of capital (the owners and employers of capital) in the major Anglophone economies after the crisis of the mid-to-late 1970s. This in turn was a reaction against the ‘welfare Keynesianism’ of the 1930s to 1960s; for a similar reading, see Edgerton, 2019 (for the UK) and Hayward, 2020 (for the US). The austerity policies of successive Governments since 2010 represent a continuation of this resurgence.

Reviewing high-participation systems (those with over half of the age cohort in some form of higher education), Brendan Cantwell and Simon Marginson (2018) note that, as systems expand, they necessarily involve a larger part of society and become entangled in a wider set of social relations. Vertical stratification is one consequence, with differential benefits from participation, segmentation of the student population on a socioeconomic basis and a sharper institutional hierarchy. In particular, there is a tendency towards a bifurcation into an ‘artisanal’ sub-sector of high-demand and high-value institutions, and a demand-absorbing sub-sector of lower demand and ‘lower value’ institutions. This bifurcation between elite and mass segments is the outcome of two kinds of positional competition: between institutions seeking higher status and between families seeking higher status places. As a result, an elite segment becomes distinguished from the rest (the Russell Group, the Group of 8 in Australia, the US Ivy League).<sup>16</sup>

When the author and Dr Helen Carasso assessed the impact of the post-1980s reforms up to 2012 (Brown with Carasso, 2013), it was found that there were already signs that existing resourcing and status differentials between institutions, subjects and modes of study – first highlighted by David Watson and Rachel Bowden in 1999 – were beginning to widen. Gross income per full-time equivalent student in 2010/11 – an indicator of the total institutional

resources that can be applied to the education of the student – ranged from £65,840 (Cambridge) to £7,050 (Edge Hill). The sector mean average was £14,710.

These differentials have almost certainly widened since, as a result of the final abolition of the student numbers cap and the continuing concentration of research funding, on top of long-standing resource differentials. There have also been growing differences in the health of different subjects (Arts, Humanities), with many institutions, particularly the post-92 universities, cutting back on less popular courses (see, for instance, Weale et al., 2021). This is in spite of the fact that increased provider competition is intended to widen rather than constrict student choice. Finally, there has been a much discussed decline in part-time provision and provision for older students, as documented by Callender and Thompson (2018), Butcher (2020), Hillman (2021) and Callender and Melis (2022).

### Commodification

*[T]he consumption model, in shifting the focus so successfully away from learning processes and on to educational outcomes, denies students the transformational potential of higher level study in exchange for satisfactory experience and a suitable product (degree attainment).*

Joanna Williams, 2011, p.181

There is an extensive literature on how under marketisation – through the commercial rankings and exercises like the National Student Survey and now the TEF, as well as the broader pro-market discourse already mentioned – the identity of the student is being recast from that of the traditional ‘apprentice scholar’ to that of ‘novice consumer’, where students see themselves as customers with needs rather than as partners in an educational project. There can be little doubt that many students do see themselves in this way, with potential implications for the quality of their learning.<sup>17</sup>

## Participation

*The picture that emerges is of a socially differentiated higher education system, with the elite institutions tending to be dominated by middle-class, white and male students, many of whom are from the private schools sector. These students benefit from the intrinsic and positional benefits of going to a 'good' university, and the elite continues to reproduce itself, with the status of a university increasingly defined by the profile of its student intake.*

Carole Leathwood, 2004, p.38

*For commodification to work, in the arena of a basic social process such as education, exclusion is vital. There need to be visible losers, if parents are to be persuaded to pay for their children to become winners. Neoliberalism in education, therefore, persistently draws attention to the underachievers, the 'at risk', the non-performers, the pockets of poverty, the bad schools, the bad families, the under-motivated, the excluded, the failures.*

Raewyn Connell, 2013b, p.282<sup>18</sup>

Not even the most strenuous advocate of neoliberalism would claim that markets necessarily produce socially fair outcomes. By definition, markets are designed to produce winners and losers. The fact that successive Governments have since the 1980s introduced various policies to encourage institutions to widen their intakes – even though this represents interference with the market – is at least an implicit recognition of this potential detriment.

There has in fact been some improvement in the participation of some less well-represented groups in higher education over the past 35 years. However the overall improvement has been small, significant gaps remain and the inverse association between socioeconomic intake and institutional status persists:

*It will take nearly a century for highly-selective universities in England to raise the participation rate for 18-to-30-year-olds*

*from the least advantaged areas to the existing participation rate for 18-to-30-year-olds from the most advantaged areas. If, instead, the number of degree places at more selective universities were kept steady, the number of places for advantaged pupils would need to fall by as much as 10,000, which is one-third of current annual intakes. (Elliot Major and Banerjee, 2019)<sup>19</sup>*

This in turn ultimately reflects the application of non-redistributive neoliberal policies in society both generally and in the education system. The late Brian Barry's comment (2005, p.66) still applies:

*Whereas a socially just education system would minimise the effects on children's opportunities of their parents' social and economic positions, the current set-up in Britain operates at every point to expand the advantages of parents with education, money and high aspirations. 'School choice' is just the final straw, in which the effects of parental advantages and disadvantages are multiplied by placing an enormous premium on know-how and resources.*

## **Conclusion**

It seems to the author unarguable that (a) the Government-led reforms to English higher education since the late 1980s reflect neoliberal theory, especially about market competition, consumer information and 'user pays'; and (b) these policies can be expected to have some of the same impacts as neoliberal policies in other areas through stratification, commodification and participation, and are indeed already doing so. It is regrettable, but perhaps not entirely surprising, that so little effort appears to have been put into a proper assessment of the cumulative impact of the reforms either by the Government or by the sector. This would seem to be essential if we are to move beyond current levels of participation as some are strongly arguing (for instance, Blackman, 2017). Step forward HEPI.<sup>20</sup>

## Acknowledgements

Roger Brown wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the help he received from Dr Tony Bruce, Professor Claire Callender, Dr Helen Carasso, Professor Vaneeta D'Andrea, Professor Deborah Gill, Professor Jane Hemsley-Brown, Professor Lee Elliot Major, Professor Rod Rhodes, Professor Mark Smith and Solent University Library.

## Endnotes

- 1 Brown, R. (2011) p.1. There is now an extensive literature on the marketisation of higher education, not all of it as scholarly as might be desired. For the UK, see Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon (2011), Brown with Carasso (2013), Callender and Scott (2013), John and Fanghangel (2016), Watts (2017), Scott (2021) and Jones (2022). Applying critical discourse analysis to official texts, McCaig (2018) identifies five stages: 1986-92 ('efficiency and accountability'); 1992-2000 ('celebration of diversity'); 2000-10 ('from diversity to differentiation and the introduction of a market'); 2010-15 ('competitive differentiation within the emerging market'); and 2015-18 ('competitive differentiation driven by risk and exit'). Tholen (2022) argues that it was a set of beliefs about the quantity and quality of human capital as the key ingredient of economic success, and the universities' important role in developing this, rather than a general right-wing or neoliberal political force affecting the public sector, that has been the main driver. He identifies user-pays finance, managerialism and commodification as the key dimensions. For the position internationally, see Teixeira et al. (2004), Brown, R. (2011), Slaughter and Cantwell (2012), Cantwell et al. (2018), and Branch and Christiansen (2021).
- 2 Although it includes some elements of a market-based system, Scotland has adopted a distinctive alternative to the policies in place in England, with the introduction of free education for full-time Scottish-domiciled undergraduates in 2008 as the most obvious. Wales and Northern Ireland have followed England much more closely although both countries have set their fee caps at a lower level. For students studying at their home universities, fee levels are capped at £9,000 in Wales and £4,710 in Northern Ireland compared to £9,250 in England in 2023/24.
- 3 The issue which is not discussed here is whether the reform policies identified could have been avoided if the overall aim was to continue to expand the system equitably while reducing or minimising future claims on public expenditure, as Nicholas Hillman (2016) and Lord Willetts (2017) assert.
- 4 It has been argued (for instance by Nicholas Barr, 2009) that the present system is actually closer to a graduate tax than a real loan scheme. But a genuine graduate tax would lack the linkage between investment and return required by neoliberal theory (see below). Indeed, one of the principal authors of the 2012 reforms, Lord Willetts, has claimed (2017, p.79) that the first graduate repayment scheme was devised by Milton Friedman and Gary Becker at Yale Law School in the 1970s: the Yale Tuition Postponement Option. Friedman and Becker are two of the 'high priests' of neoliberalism.



- 5 It is clear from the Impact Assessments of the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) that the Government thought that as a result of the liberalisation of market entry requirements, there could be over 600 registered providers by 2019/20 and 900 by 2028/29. There would be then be a further 244 providers outside the system (Department for Education *Higher Education and Research Act 2017 Detailed impact assessments Annex A, December 2017*). I am very grateful to Nicholas Hillman for drawing my attention to this point.
- 6 Government research funds are allocated competitively through peer review (Carasso, 2022).
- 7 The main subsidy is to student loans. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (Belfield et al., 2017) estimated total up-front Government expenditure on young full-time England-domiciled students at the largest 90 English universities starting their courses in 2017/18 (at 2017 prices) as being £17,088 million, of which £748 million took the form of direct grants.
- 8 One instance of this has been the increased institutional attention to marketing which was criticised by the Augar Committee (*Post-18 review of education and funding: independent panel report*, 2019, p.78). They also identified grade inflation, lowering of entry requirements and the increased use of conditional offers as further possible detriments of increased market competition. In a fascinating study of higher education branding, Vaneeta D'Andrea, Bjorn Stensaker and Jen Allsion (2007) investigated changes in the visual images of 15 pre-92 UK universities in the 15 years following the abolition of the binary line. Only two did not change their logos, and those that did, although presenting themselves in brighter colours and simpler designs, still used prestige referents like heritage symbols or symbols of knowledge. Even those adopting some of the most abstract designs were still linked to images of heritage buildings or modified crests with traditional images of open books embedded in them.
- 9 Harvey (2005) remains as good an introduction as any.
- 10 The other main problem is the public goods aspect (Marginson, 2011, 2013).
- 11 Some time in the mid-90s, the Higher Education Quality Council held an international conference in London. The keynote was given by the distinguished Chancellor of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, the late Stig Hagström (formerly Professor of Materials Science and Engineering at Stanford). Asked in the Q&A why universities were the only medieval institutions – other than the Papacy – to have survived, his answer was 'universities are very good at cheating'.
- 12 A detailed 2005 survey of student decision making stated, '[we] found very little of the calculative, individualistic, consumer rationalism that predominates in official texts' (Reay et al., p.58). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016) show how student choice making is a complex process and very far from being fully rational: in particular, personal and group characteristics shape attitudes to institutional characteristics (see also, Hemsley-Brown, 2011). Callender and Dougherty (2018) similarly find very little evidence that students are rational consumers. Students' choices are shaped by many factors including their social background. If anything, indeed, students' choices reproduce, and even legitimate, existing social inequalities.

- 13 Hansmann (1999) argues that much in higher education can be explained by the idea of student education being an 'associative good' whereby a major consideration for purchasers is / are the personal characteristics of the other customers.
- 14 Several writers (e.g., Tholen, 2022, p.21) explicitly link managerialism and the increased importance of rankings. There is also concern that the competitive pressures associated even with the present level of competition may be weakening academic collegiality (for example, Sparkes, 2007). Finally, there may be a threat to universities' charitable status (Synge, 2023).
- 15 Such a system of course assumes that students are the only or at least the chief beneficiaries of higher education, and indeed that only economic benefits count. A good riposte is Geoffrey Walford's: 'Perhaps the most important way in which education differs from simple consumer products is that it is not just the primary customer who benefits. The strangest aspect of the idea that the market can ensure quality is that it implies that there is only one customer, or type of customer ... Schooling is unlike a consumer product because there are multiple stakeholders ... multiple customers – who make multiple demands on schooling and also benefit from particular forms of schooling. Schooling and, more important, education is not an individual benefit where quality can be judged solely in terms of the individual preferences of the person who is being educated. Education is essentially a social and a moral affair. It is an activity in which the society within which an individual lives is actively involved'. (Walford, 2006, pp.60-61). This of course is about as far away from neoliberal theory as it could be.
- 16 As is well known, the Russell Group began as a device to enable the pre-92 universities with medical schools to coordinate their positions in discussions of medical funding in the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals. Structurally, however, with its subsequent expansion to incorporate a number of universities without medical schools, it can be seen as a reaction to the abolition of the binary line.
- 17 For commodification, see Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) and Barnett (2007). Reviewing a range of mostly American studies, Harrison and Risler (2015) argue that educational quality is compromised when students are understood as customers to be placated rather than as learners to be challenged. Based on a study of 608 undergraduates in English universities, Louise Bunce and colleagues (2018) find that a higher consumer orientation is associated with lower academic performance. More such studies are badly needed.
- 18 The Government's July 2023 intended purge of 'rip off' courses (Department for Education, 2023) would appear to be a good example, although Ministers seem for the moment to be disinclined to agree to the minimum entry standards flagged by the Augar Committee.
- 19 A report in the *Daily Telegraph* on 13 July 2023 (Clarence-Smith, 2023) suggested that, according to official data, private school students were more than twice as likely as their state school counterparts to go to a 'top' university during the pandemic. Elliot Major (2023) notes that just under half of A level entries in the private sector were A or A\* compared with less than a quarter in the state system.

20 Dr Helen Carasso suggests that the main differences in policy approaches in different parts of the UK could provide a good basis for such an assessment alongside international experience more widely.

## References

- Ashwin, P. (2020) *Transforming University Education: A Manifesto* London: Bloomsbury
- Barnett, R. (2007) *A Will to Learn: Being a student in an age of uncertainty* Maidenhead: Open University Press / McGraw Hill
- Barr, N. (2009, March 24) A graduate tax is for life, not just for a few years. *The Guardian*
- Barry, B. (2005) *Why social justice matters*. Cambridge: Polity
- Belfield, C., Britton, J., Dearden, L. and van der Erve, L. (2017) *Higher Education funding in England: past, present and options for the future*. IFS Briefing Note BN211 London: Institute for Fiscal Studies
- Blackman, T. (2017) *The Comprehensive University* HEPI Occasional Paper No.17 Oxford: HEPI.
- Boggs, A. (2023) *Where do we go from here? Quality assurance in English higher education*. HEPI Policy Note 44. February 2023. Oxford: HEPI
- Branch, J.D. and Christiansen, B. (2021) *The marketisation of higher education: Concepts, cases and criticisms* London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Brown, R. (Ed.) (2011) *Higher Education and the Market* New York and London: Routledge
- Brown, R. with Carasso, H. (2013) *Everything for Sale? The marketisation of UK higher education*. London and New York: Routledge
- Brown, R. (2014) The real crisis in higher education. *Higher Education Review* 46 (3), pp.4-25.
- Brown, R. (2017) *The Inequality Crisis: The facts and what we can do about it*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Brown, R. (2018) Changing Patterns of Accountability in the UK – From QA to TEF. In E.Hazelkorn, A.C.McCormick and H.Coates (eds) *Research Handbook on Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education* (pp.457-471) Cheltenham: Edward Elgar
- Brown, R. (2022) *The Conservative Counter-Revolution in Britain and America 1980-2020*. Cham, Switzerland: PalgraveMacmillan
- Brown, W. (2011) Neoliberal Knowledge. *History of the Present* 1 (1), pp.113-129
- Brown, W. (2019) *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* New York: Columbia University Press
- Bunce, L., Baird, A. and Jones, S.E. (2017) The student-as-consumer approach to higher education and its effect on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education* 42 (11), pp.1958-1978
- Butcher, J. (2020) *Unheard: the voices of part-time learners*. HEPI Report 125 6 February
- Callahan, D. (2004) *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* San Diego: Harcourt Publishing
- Callender, C. and Dougherty, K.J. (2018) Student Choice in Higher Education – Reducing or Reproducing Social Inequalities? *Social Sciences* 7, 10, p.189

- Callender, C. and Melis, G. (2021) The Privilege of Choice: How Prospective College Students' Financial Concerns Influence Their Choice of Higher Education Institution and Subject of Study in England. *The Journal of Higher Education* 93 (3), pp.477-501
- Callender, C. and Scott, P. (eds.) (2013) *Browne and Beyond: Modernizing English higher education*. London: Institute of Education Press
- Callender, C. and Thompson, J. (2018) *The Lost Part-Timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England*. The Sutton Trust, March
- Cantwell, B., S. Marginson and A.Smolentseva (eds) (2018) *High Participation Systems of Higher Education* Oxford: Oxford: University Press
- Cantwell, B. and Marginson, S. (2018) *Vertical Stratification* in Cantwell, B., S. Marginson and A.Smolentseva (eds) (2018) *High Participation Systems of Higher Education* Oxford: Oxford: University Press
- Carasso, H. (2022) The birth, life and legacy of the Research Assessment Exercise. In L. Brassington (Ed) *Research Evaluation: Past, Present, Future*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute
- Choat, S. (2017) Tuition fees and the neoliberal university. *Renewal* 25, 3-4, pp.138-144
- Clarence-Smith, L. (2023) Stark gap between public and private school pupils getting into top universities widens *Daily Telegraph* on-line 13 July telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/07/13/private-schools-gap-with-state-education-rises
- Collini, S. (2012) *What are universities for?* London: Penguin
- Collini, S. (2017) *Speaking of Universities* London: Verso
- Connell, R. (2013a) The neoliberal cascade and higher education: an essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (2), pp.99-112
- Connell, R. (2013b) Why do market 'reforms' persistently increase inequality? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34 (2), pp.279-285
- D'Andrea, V., Stensaker, B. and Allison, J. (2007) 'Images and Identity in the Branding of the University: Exploring the symbolic and cultural implications' in Stensaker, B. and D'Andrea, V. (eds.) (2007) *Branding in Higher Education; Exploring an Emerging Phenomenon* Amsterdam: European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR)
- Deem, R. (2001) Globalisation, new managerialism, academic capitalism and entrepreneurialism in universities: Is the local dimension still important? *Comparative Education* 37 (1), pp.7-20
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) (2015) *Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- Department for Education (2023) *Crackdown on rip-off university degrees: University courses that fail to deliver good outcomes, with high drop-out rates and poor employment prospects will be subject to strict controls*. (Press release, 17 July 2023)
- Docherty, T. (2014) *Universities at war* (London: Sage).
- Edgerton, D. (2019) *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth Century History* London: Penguin
- Friedman, M. (1962) *Capitalism and Democracy* Chicago: Chicago University Press

- Gerstle, G. (2022) *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Giroux, H.A. (2014) *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* Chicago: Haymarket
- Gunn, A, (2023) *Teaching Excellence: Universities in an age of student consumerism* London: Sage
- Hansmann, H. (1999) *Higher Education as an Associative Good* Yale Law School Program for Studies in Law, Economics and Public Policy Working Paper No.99-15
- Harrison, L. and Risler, L. (2015) The role consumerism plays in student learning. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 16 (1), pp.67-76
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hayward, S. (2010) *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counter-Revolution 1980-1989* El Segundo, California: Fodor
- Hemsley-Brown, J. (2011) Market heal thyself: The challenges of a free market in higher education *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 21 (2), pp.115-132
- Hemsley-Brown, J. and Oplatka, I. (2016) *Higher Education Consumer Choice* Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan
- Hillman, N. (2016) The Coalition's higher education reforms in England *Oxford Review of Education* 42 (3), pp.330-345
- Hillman, N. (2021) *Student numbers before, during and after the crisis*. 13 April <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/04/13/student-numbers-before-during-and-afef-the-crisis>
- Holmwood, J. (Ed.) (2011) *A Manifesto for the Public University*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic
- House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee (2023) *Must do better: the Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Report of Session 2022-23 HL Paper 246 5<sup>th</sup> September.
- Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the Browne Report) (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*. London: Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills
- John, P. and Fanghangel, J. (2016) (eds) *Dimensions of Marketisation in Higher Education*. London and New York: Routledge
- Jones, S. (2022) *Universities Under Fire: Hostile Discourses and Integrity Deficits in Higher Education*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan
- Leathwood, C. (2004) A critique of institutional inequalities in higher education (or an alternative to hypocrisy for higher educational policy) *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (1), pp.31-48
- Le Grand, J. and Bartlett, W. (1993) *Quasi-markets and social policy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Lynch, K. (2006) Neo-liberalism and Marketisation: the implications for higher education. *European Educational Research Journal* 5 (1), pp.1-17
- Lynch, K. (2015) Control by numbers: new managerialism and ranking in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education* 56 (2), pp.190-207

- Maisuria, A. and Cole, M. (2017) The neoliberalization of higher education in England: An alternative is possible. *Policy Futures in Education* 15 (5), pp.602-619
- Major, Lee Elliot (2023) Equality depends on education. England's class of 2023 have suffered a grave injustice over A-level results. 20 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/20/equality-depends-on-education-englands-class-of-2023-have-suffered-a-grave-injustice-over-A-level-results>
- Major, Lee Elliot and Banerjee, P.A. (2019) *Social mobility and elite universities* HEPI Policy Note 20 December
- Marginson, S. (2011) Higher education and public good. *Higher Education Quarterly* 65 (4), pp.411-433
- Marginson, S. (2013) The impossibility of capitalist markets in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy* 28 (3), pp.353-370
- Massy, W. (2004) Markets in higher education: do they promote internal efficiency? In Teixeira, P.N., Jongbloed, B., Dill, D. and Amaral, A. (eds) *Markets in Higher Education: Rhetoric or Reality?* Dordrecht: Kluwer
- McCaig, C. (2018) *The Marketisation of English Higher Education: A Policy Analysis of a Risk-based System* Bingley: Emerald
- McGettigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble* London: Pluto Press
- Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (2011) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer* London and New York: Routledge
- Naidoo, R. and Jamieson, I. (2005) Knowledge in the marketplace: the global commodification of teaching and learning. In P.Innes and M. Hellsten (eds) *Internationalising Higher Education: Critical Explorations of Pedagogy and Policy*, pp.37-53. Hong Kong: Springer
- National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report) (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. London: HMSO
- Neave, G. (2005) The supermarketed university: reform, vision and ambiguity in British higher education. *Perspectives* 9 (1) pp.17-22
- Newfield, C. (2011) *Unmaking the public university: The forty-year assault on the middle-class* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Olssen, M. and Peters, M.A. (2005) Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism *Journal of Education Policy* 20 (3), pp.313-345
- Post-18 review of education and funding: independent panel report (Augar Report) (2019) London: Department for Education
- Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (Eds) (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education* London: Trentham Books
- Scott, P. (2021) *Retreat or Resolution? Tackling the Crisis of Mass Higher Education* Bristol: Policy Press
- Sibieta, L. (2023) *Tax, private school fees and state school spending*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies

- Slaughter, S. and Cantwell, B. (2012) Transatlantic moves to the market: The US and EU. *Higher Education* 63 (5), pp.583-606
- Smyth, J. (2017) *Toxic University* London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Smyth, J. (2020) The neoliberal *toxic university*: Beyond *no is not enough* and daring to dream a socially just alternative into existence. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52(7) 716-725
- Sparkes, A.C. (2007) Embodiment, Academics and the Audit Culture: a story seeking consideration *Qualitative Research* 7, pp.521-550
- Syngé, M. (2023) *The University-Charity: Challenging Perceptions* [www.university-charity.co.uk](http://www.university-charity.co.uk)
- Teixeira, P.N., Jongbloed, B., Dill, D. and Amaral, A. (eds) *Markets in Higher Education: Rhetoric or Reality?* Dordrecht: Kluwer
- Tholen, G. (2022) *Modern Work and the Marketisation of Higher Education* Bristol: Policy Press.
- Trow, M. (1992) Aspects of quality in higher education. Paper prepared for a conference *Quality and the Renewal of Higher Education* Stockholm, 12-13 March
- Vernon, J. (2018) The Making of the Neoliberal University in Britain. *Critical Historical Studies* 5 (2), pp.267-280
- Walford, G. (2006) *Markets and Equity in Education* London: Continuum
- Watson, D. and Bowden, R. (1999) Now take a look at our figures: Previous tables have shown just one thing - that institutions with money always do well, argue David Watson and Rachel Bowden *The Guardian* 9 November
- Watts, R. (2019) *Public Universities, Managerialism and the Value of Higher Education* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan
- Weale, S., Adams, R. and Hall, R. (2021, 25 May) London South Bank University staff sound alarm over drop in courses. *The Guardian*
- Weimer, D.L. and Vining, A.R. (1992) *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall
- Willetts, D. (2010) *David Willetts' speech to UniversitiesUK Annual Conference* 9 September <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/david-willetts-speech-to-universities-uk-annual-conference>
- Willetts, D. (2017) *A University Education* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Williams, J. (2012) *Consuming Higher Education: Why Learning Can't Be Bought*. London: Continuum
- Winston, G.C. (1997) Why can't a college be more like a firm? In Meyerson, J. (Ed) *New Thinking on Higher Education: Creating a Context for Change*. Boston: Anker





## Part Two

### Neoliberalism in UK higher education: Response to Roger Brown

Nick Hillman

One of my first tasks in higher education policy, over 15 years ago, was opening some correspondence sent by Roger Brown to my boss David Willetts MP, the Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Based on one of Roger's visits to the United States, the letter was more detailed and – frankly – more interesting than most of the correspondence we received. It warned Willetts and his Conservative colleagues against thinking the power of the market could improve higher education in England or the UK.

Roger has been ploughing this furrow consistently, before and since. His critique continued after Willetts had been appointed as the Coalition's Minister for Universities and Science within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in 2010, and it continued after Willetts had moved on to pastures new. Today, there are no signs of it abating.

So I am grateful to Roger for suggesting I write this response to his piece on neoliberalism and English higher education. Whether or not the free market aids the delivery of higher education, free debate is undoubtedly the best way to grope towards a sensible higher education policy – and it is HEPI's *raison d'être* to stimulate and participate in that debate.

#### **Don't say 'neoliberal'!**

The term 'neoliberal' has long been discouraged in HEPI's *Instructions to Authors*.<sup>1</sup> This stricture was originally added at the behest of a vice-chancellor who was then on the HEPI Advisory Board, which oversees the organisation's peer-review process. The vice-chancellor in question bemoaned the tendency of authors to use the term without explaining what they meant.

Although this would never be a fair accusation to level at Roger, who always writes with great clarity, there were other reasons for including such discouragement too. A second key reason was that supposed adherents of the neoliberal ideology in modern politics never use the term themselves: the right do not and nor do the centre left. Compare the use of 'neoliberal' to the use of the term 'socialist'; the latter is still proudly worn as a badge of honour. It remains essential, for example, to claim you are a socialist if you want a serious pop at the Labour Party leadership – Keir Starmer certainly did it.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, not even Liz Truss – the recent Prime Minister who is perhaps the closest embodiment of neoliberalism – donned the term 'neoliberal' on her path to power. When a descriptor is solely used as a criticism or even as a term of abuse for mainstream political opinions, as 'neoliberal' generally is, it loses its analytical value.

Although HEPI is a charity and strictly non-partisan, I worked for the Conservative cause for many years and was a Conservative candidate at the 2010 General Election. Yet I cannot remember hearing the term 'neoliberal' being prayed in aid once. This perhaps should not come as a surprise, given Conservatism tends to elevate the pursuit of power above any specific ideology. Nor can I remember anyone plotting about the 'marketisation' of higher education. We did, however, sometimes regard students as resembling consumers in many respects, but then they quite clearly do – that is why they are surveyed so often for their views by official bodies, by independent organisations (like HEPI and Advance HE) and by their own institutions.

Some of those who write about neoliberalism use the term in more comprehensive ways but, when this happens, it risks becoming a catch-all. For example, Gary Gerstle's magisterial book *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, which is referred to above by both Chris Husbands and Roger Brown, takes a neat-and-tidy approach to history.<sup>3</sup> It sees pretty much everything that occurred in national

politics in the USA (and the UK) from the 1970s until 2008/09 through a neoliberal lens – whether it was growing rates of imprisonment, the rise of personal computers or the failure to rebuild Iraq.

While this sweeping approach helps make sense of broad political change, it misses how messy policymaking is close up. As a result, all-encompassing stories about the triumph of neoliberalism do not, in the end, go all that far in explaining the details of higher education policy across the UK in the early twentieth century. This is confirmed by the fact that the biggest changes, those responding to growing demand for higher education and those encouraging a diverse supply of places, occurred in the 2010s – just as the period of the ‘neoliberal order’ is said to have come to an end.

A further oddity is that those who bemoan the neoliberal marketisation of UK higher education can never agree on when this supposedly clear process began. Was it when international students ceased to receive taxpayer subsidies in the early 1980s, thereby introducing a market in international students?<sup>4</sup> Or was it when maintenance loans were introduced for home students in the early 1990s? Or was it when fees returned for full-time undergraduate students in 1998? Or perhaps it was when these fees were tripled for the first time in 2006 or for the second time in 2012? Or maybe it was when the Higher Education Funding Council for England was replaced by a market regulator in the Office for Students? Or even when student loans were reformed in 2023 to minimise the write-off costs faced by taxpayers?

We are expected to believe the application of neoliberal ideas to UK higher education was a radical shift with the past but, if it is so radical and such a clear change in direction, why is its starting point completely indistinct and why has it outlived the neoliberal period? The answer lies in the fact that policies in mature democracies tend to be processes, not pendulums swinging back and forth.

With the clear exception (to date) of the SNP and the Greens in Scotland, every political party in power across the UK in recent times has accepted the logic of high tuition fees. Some might say this just goes to show the prevalence of the neoliberal order; yet it includes the modern Labour Party, which (in conjunction with the Lib Dems) introduced fees of £9,000 in Wales in 2018, while the UK Labour Leader was Jeremy Corbyn, who stood fiercely opposed to neoliberalism.

## **Back at BIS**

Back at BIS, where I worked for David Willetts and the Coalition, we never thought we were part of some major ideological crusade. Rather, we considered our role to be strengthening institutions and delivering for those keen to access higher education, within the confines set by voters at the ballot box.

All the main UK-wide parties at the 2010 election had promised big cuts to public spending and, while all were prepared to exempt some areas of expenditure, none was prepared to exempt higher education or the Department responsible for it. So if austerity were a wicked neoliberal plot to eviscerate the nation, it was a plot that nearly all voters – left and right – plumped for in 2010.

Whoever was at the helm as the Minister for Universities would have had to deal with that fact. We faced a clear choice: fewer students; slashing the amount spent on each student's education; or rebalancing who pays. In a decision reminiscent of *Yes Minister*, we were confronted by two unacceptable options and one feasible one. So it was not in practice a difficult decision.

This feeling of being hemmed in by reality was doubly strong given there had been an independent review established by a Government of a different hue (resulting in the Browne report) that urged us to implement something akin to the least toxic option. It was triply strong once we had listened to the experts in accounting practices,

who insisted that new student loan borrowings must be kept out of the official figures on current public spending, thereby making it even more of a no-brainer to load a higher proportion of the costs of higher education on to income-contingent student loans.<sup>5</sup> Nothing that the students protesting on the streets of London could do, and they did some terrible things both to the Cenotaph and to Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall's car, could change the basic facts.

So we did not feel as if we were part of some ideological battle and, if we had, we would not have been in the vanguard of it, for we based our reforms very closely on those of the outgoing Labour Government.

Hindsight suggests the real genius of Tony Blair's higher education reforms was that they allowed fees to be raised without introducing new primary legislation, which tends to be such a lengthy process that it would have given the Liberal Democrats even more heartache. Indeed, delay of this nature would presumably have led the Lib Dems to demand the sort of 'pause' that was introduced to Andrew Lansley's NHS reforms or the complete halt that was placed on Caroline Spelman's forest sell-off at around the same time.

In his 'exposé' of life as the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg claims he proposed a delay to the increase in the fee cap that was blocked by Vince Cable and David Willetts on the grounds that 'universities will go nuts'. Clegg concludes: 'If only I had dug my heels in and let them go nuts.'<sup>6</sup> After the fees votes in the House of Commons and the House of Lords in late 2010, the Lib Dems in government became obsessed with 'optics' and, had a pause occurred, it might have provided good short-term optics for them, as they could have claimed they had blocked the objectives of those cold-hearted Tories with whom they shared power. (Instead they were left making the wholly false claim that there would have been no fee cap at all without their moderating influence.<sup>7</sup>) Yet a pause would have been irresponsible. As the experienced politician Ken Clarke put it to us

at the time, if you genuinely believe your policies will bring about a better situation than the status quo by the time of the next election, then the wise and responsible thing to do is to get on with them and see them through.

If the result of the 2010 election had been different, we know from Peter Mandelson's autobiography that fees would still have risen significantly.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the guillotine would not have come down on the sorts of policies identified by Roger Brown and others as neoliberal.

At the subsequent election of 2015, Ed Miliband's radical higher education policy was to accept fees of £6,000, which was still a near doubling since he had last been a Government Minister. At the time of writing, when the real value of fees has sunk back to Miliband's preferred £6,000 in real terms, it is hard to recall why this idea seemed at the time to offer something distinctively different from the Coalition's approach, but many people felt that it did.

Some of those I had worked with on the 2010 to 2012 reforms, for example, felt Miliband was trying to pull the rug from under the changes but I was sceptical of this argument because, whether fees were set at £3,000, £6,000 or £9,000, they were hung on the Blair model that had first been announced in a white paper back in 2003. Whether people agree with the system or not, it has proved remarkably resilient.

We can now see the real difference in policy offer came after Miliband, with Jeremy Corbyn's policies of no fees, the return of maintenance grants, the possible writing off of graduate debt and the foundation of a new (but incredibly vague) National Education System. Interesting though these might have been if they had ever been rolled out, such commitments contributed to the general sense among many people that Corbyn was not a serious prospect as a national leader. The episode confirmed yet again that radical higher education policies probably win only modest numbers of additional

votes for any major political party, but they can simultaneously lose votes by putting a question mark over a party's general economic competence.<sup>9</sup>

### **A radical policy of our own**

So I would argue that – after the 2010 election – our hands were bound but, just as importantly, we also had a radical and progressive policy of our own as we wanted significantly more student places. We knew there was surging demand for higher education that was not being served – most famously marked by a BBC headline in the same month as the 2010 election that read “250,000” to miss university places this year.<sup>10</sup>

We had to work hard to make the case for significantly more places and a demand-driven system, even after the higher fees that were designed to ease the pressure on taxpayers had begun. There was general opposition to further major higher education changes from senior Conservatives (for example, in the Cabinet Office) as well as from the Liberal Democrats, and there was growing concern in the Treasury about student loan write-off costs. I vividly recall proposing the removal of student number caps in a meeting in Number 10 Downing Street that was chaired by Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary. He pooh-poohed the idea as too radical even to contemplate and quickly moved the conversation on.<sup>11</sup>

So we had to think creatively. We resorted to using the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 Robbins report – which might have been written by a liberal economist but which can hardly be described as neoliberal – to win our case.<sup>12</sup> David Willetts's 2013 Social Market Foundation pamphlet, *Robbins Revisited*, can lay claim to being one of the most influential think-tank publications of the twenty-first century so far. It overlaid the Robbins Report's arguments on the contemporary world, noting – for example – that ‘If everyone had the entry rate of the highest quintile, the numbers entering higher education would be much higher: 570,000 in 2011-12 instead of the actual figure of 368,000.’<sup>13</sup>

Using history like this was a subtle attempt to break the confines of collective responsibility: we were, in effect, using the past as a way to complain about our own Government's continuing restrictions on student numbers. I am amazed we got away with it. But bolstered by some internal Treasury work on the link between the number of graduates and productivity gains and by the positive personal relationship between George Osborne and David Willetts, our argument prevailed.

The removal of student number caps was announced in December 2013 as part of the Autumn Statement. It was my final day in the office as the Special Adviser to the Minister for Universities and Science, for I had delayed my departure until the announcement was out. It was the best day too.

The removal of student number caps is the best response to Roger's claim above that markets are not designed to 'produce socially fair outcomes'. It rested on the fee changes and has allowed tens of thousands of extra people to graduate. It implemented the Robbins Principle that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.'<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, however, in the very month of the sixtieth anniversary of the Robbins Report in October 2023, some influential voices on both the left and the right were once more calling for the return of student number caps.<sup>15</sup>

It may sound to some readers as if I am setting up a false Thatcher-style TINA-argument ('There is No Alternative') for the Coalition's higher education reforms, but consider what has happened to further education (FE) in recent decades.

Whatever warm words have been spoken about it by successive Ministers of different political persuasions and however many promises of 'parity of esteem' have been made, the FE sector has been denuded. Since 2003/04, adult further education spending is down by two-thirds in real terms, for example.<sup>16</sup>



Higher education has done relatively well (at least until high inflation returned) not because politicians prefer it – often they do not – but because universities have been set at one remove from the grinding battle that takes place constantly for more direct public expenditure. This is a battle which higher education has lost time and time again against other electoral priorities, such as the National Health Service (NHS), schools, pensions, defence and even tax cuts.

### **More red tape**

You often hear it said, and it is clearly articulated in Roger's piece, that one failure of the neoliberal project is that regulation has gone up rather than down. In contrast to the concept of wholly autonomous institutions living or dying through market forces, we have a large Office for Students and various other regulators delivering more oversight of higher education institutions than ever before.

Many people on campus dislike what they regard as the accountability metrics that seemingly come with neoliberalism and use a critique of neoliberalism to argue that they should be monitored less. It is not just staff; in the past, the National Union of Students took against the National Student Survey and tried to boycott it.

Yet it is an error to assume accountability mechanisms only exist because neoliberalism has taken over.

Roger himself, when he was a vice-chancellor, closely considered the data for his institution to ensure it was delivering on its mission; indeed, he set up a whole unit to help him do so.

Similarly, it is not only institutions in neoliberal nations that tot up performance on a regular basis: command economies were hardly known for their slack approach to collecting performance data.

## F\*\*k fees

It may come as a surprise given what I have written, but I do not think the cause of funding higher education through general taxation is necessarily lost forever. My long-held view is that we should strive for a world in which at least 70 per cent of young people benefit from higher education, making it close to a universal service (especially when mature learners entering via the new Lifelong Learning Entitlement are also taken into account).<sup>17</sup> Universal services, like schooling and the NHS tend to be covered out of general taxation. (Brexit boosts this argument further because it is no longer necessary for anyone from 27 other countries to be given the right to be enrolled at UK universities for free, which would otherwise be an especially pressing challenge given international students tend to gravitate towards English-speaking countries that do well in the main global league tables.)



A student protest in London,  
10 November 2010

Therefore, paradoxically, anyone who wants higher education in England to be funded through general taxation once again should (in my view) welcome the removal of student number caps, which

could only happen thanks to the increase in fees. It is the removal of student number caps that allows us to move towards that 70 per cent participation goal which could bring older funding models back in to play.

Places that have retained 'free' higher education, including Scotland, have had to take a less relaxed approach to the question of how many students there should be.

### **More diverse provision**

The last time Roger and I discussed his ideas in person, we chatted about the example of a struggling modern university in a city that also contains a Russell Group university. Roger argued that constraints should be put on the system to guarantee the struggling university thrives. He was dismissive in response to my question of why we should force people to attend particular institutions they are less keen on rather than letting institutions and applicants find one another in more open match-making ways.

Roger's reply made it clear he sees the needs of the system as more important than the needs of individuals with large amounts of social capital, who he thinks are likely to thrive whatever occurs and wherever they are sent.<sup>18</sup> His argument is based on an assumption that only by looking after the system as a whole can we deliver real choice of the sort free marketeers triumph but supposedly cannot deliver in practice. I might have found Roger's conception of choice more convincing if I had not just been through a school application round in which my daughter was offered only her fourth-choice school, one rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted until recently. Such options are not meaningful choices for those on the receiving end – and people may respond by buying themselves out of the system altogether.

I share the view that we need a vibrant and diverse higher education sector with lots of choice. That is why I have so often stuck my neck above the parapet to make the case for what used to be labelled

'alternative providers'. As my old boss David Willetts told the 2011 Universities UK Annual Conference: 'The biggest lesson I have learned is that the most powerful driver of reform is to let new providers into the system. They do things differently in ways none can predict.'<sup>19</sup>

So the biggest disappointment in recent higher education policies for those of a free-market disposition is how this agenda has fallen off the table. There are far fewer providers on the Office for Students' Register than there were meant to be.<sup>20</sup> In December 2022, it was officially admitted that:

*While the government may have envisaged that more new providers would have registered with the OfS than have done so in practice, it is not currently government policy to actively seek to increase the numbers of HE providers.<sup>21</sup>*

In other words, after a dozen years in power, Conservatives had given up on supply-side reform of higher education, and just as the number of young people was surging. Talk to people who are trying to do things differently when it comes to the delivery of higher education, and they will very often tell you they regret starting down the path to begin with. Despite the immense challenges faced by such institutions, there are currently some excellent initiatives underway, like the Dyson Institute, the London Interdisciplinary School and NMITE, but all remain small and there are too few of them.

It is just possible that, if a regular university falls over financially any time soon, the Government and the Office for Students may come to regret not stoking a bigger alternative sector. Private finance from an institution already active in the higher education sector could be a much cheaper way to rescue a struggling traditional university, at least from the perspective of taxpayers, than for the Exchequer to pick up the tab.

I fear Roger's more managed way of achieving diversity could quickly blend into excusing poor management and governance by providing a comfortable safety blanket. There are plenty of other ways to help at-risk universities succeed than forcing people who do not want to study at them to enrol there – such as new leadership, rationalising the course offer, changing the balance between teaching and research, managed downsizing, merging with another institution or even accepting a takeover.

Yet, sadly, much of the history of UK higher education has been characterised less by so-called neoliberalism and more by incumbents trying to block real choice, whether it is Oxford and Cambridge blocking any new institutions for half a millennium or the University of Buckingham initially having to offer licences rather than degrees because the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) would not accept that accelerated two-year degrees were an acceptable alternative to more traditional offerings.<sup>22</sup>

I wish I had a pound for every time I have read a piece that portrays UK higher education as a utopia untouched by market forces until so-called neoliberals ruined it. It is an odd argument, given how closed and elite higher education historically was. Nonetheless, we can hear its echo today from those on the left and the right who want more control over universities once more. Yet not only have incumbents regularly tried incredibly hard to block innovative competition but, when new institutions have emerged, they have more often than not sprung from the ideas of spirited individuals and in response to local needs rather than from some panjandrums in the middle living by the notion that 'the man in Whitehall knows best'.

That continues to be the case today. As shown by the attempts to get new institutions off the ground with varying degrees of success in places like Hereford, Milton Keynes and Swindon, the way to deliver more choice to more learners in more places is to use a range of delivery models. In the end then, an element of 'neoliberalism',

as Roger would see it, supplemented by other priorities such as levelling up, might actually be the way to go.

## Endnotes

- 1 HEPI, *Instructions for HEPI Authors*, May 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Instructions-for-HEPI-Authors-May-2023-1.pdf> HEPI's *Instructions to Authors* was previously known as HEPI's *Style Guide*.
- 2 Richard Osley, 'Keir Starmer leadership interview: "I'm a socialist ... for me it has a very practical application"', *Camden New Journal*, 24 January 2020 <https://www.camdennewjournal.co.uk/article/keir-starmer-interview-im-a-socialist-for-me-it-has-a-very-practical-application>; also see Sirin Kale, 'Keir Starmer: "I Still See Myself as a Socialist"', *Vice News*, 17 March 2020 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkev7y/keir-starmer-i-still-see-myself-as-a-socialist>
- 3 Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era*, 2022
- 4 Roger Brown and Helen Carasso, *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education*, 2013
- 5 Accounting practice later changed, so that student loan write-off costs came to feature as current public spending. While the author believes it is right that policymakers should follow independent accounting conventions, rather than re-writing the rules to their own advantage, the new situation produced a new anomaly: the long-term public costs of student loans came to be included in current spending figures but the long-term benefits (for example, the extra tax revenues) continued to be excluded.
- 6 Nick Clegg, *Politics Between the Extremes*, 2016, p.31
- 7 Nicholas Hillman, 'The Coalition's higher education reforms in England', *Oxford Review of Education*, vol.42 no.3, 2016, pp.330-345 DOI: [10.1080/03054985.2016.1184870](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1184870)
- 8 Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man*, 2011
- 9 Nicholas Hillman, 'From Grants for All to Loans for All: Undergraduate Finance from the Implementation of the Anderson Report (1962) to the Implementation of the Browne Report (2012)', *Contemporary British History*, vol.27 no.3, 2013, pp.249-270 DOI: [10.1080/13619462.2013.783418](https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418); Jess Lister and Meg Price, *Public Attitudes to Tuition Fees: What are Labour's options for reform?*, October 2023 <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Public-Attitudes-to-Tuition-Fees-What-are-Labours-Options-for-Reform.pdf>
- 10 Sean Coughlan, "'250,000" to miss university places this year', BBC News Online, 26 May 2010 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10156398>
- 11 Nick Hillman, 'Student number controls: The final word from HEPI', HEPI blog, 9 November 2022 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/11/09/student-number-controls-the-final-word-from-hepi-and-why-you-should-come-and-work-for-us/>
- 12 Josh Patel, 'The Puzzle of Lionel Robbins: How a Neoliberal Economist Expanded Public University Education in 1960s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol.34, no.2, June 2023, pp.220-245 <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwac039>; Nick Hillman, *The Robbins*

- Report at 60: Essential facts for policymakers today*, HEPI Policy Note 49, October 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The-Robbins-Report-at-60-Essential-facts-for-policymakers-today.pdf>
- 13 David Willetts, *Robbins Revisited: Bigger and Better Higher Education*, October 2013 <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Publication-Robbins-Revisited-Bigger-and-Better-Higher-Education-David-Willetts.pdf>
  - 14 HMSO, *Higher Education*, October 1963 <https://education-uk.org/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html>; Nick Hillman, *The Robbins Report at 60: Essential facts for policymakers today*, HEPI Policy Note 49, October 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/10/12/the-robbins-report-at-60-essential-facts-for-policymakers-today/>
  - 15 See, for example, Iain Mansfield, *What do we want from the King's Speech?*, Policy Exchange, October 2023 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/What-do-we-want-from-the-Kings-Speech.pdf>
  - 16 Joe Lewis and Paul Bolton, *Further education funding in England*, June 2023, p.7 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9194/CBP-9194.pdf>
  - 17 John Morgan, 'UK urged to set 70 per cent higher education participation target – Nick Hillman makes call in book that aims to influence Conservative policy', *Times Higher Education*, 30 September 2017 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-urged-set-70-cent-higher-education-participation-target>
  - 18 Nick Hillman, 'Is there anything left to say on grammar schools? Maybe just one thing...', HEPI Blog, 30 September 2016 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/09/30/anything-left-say-grammar-schools-maybe-just-one-thing/>
  - 19 David Willetts MP, *Speech to the Universities UK Spring Conference 2011*, 25 February 2011 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universities-uk-spring-conference-2011#:~:text=I%20have%20worked%20on%20many,drive%20reform%20across%20the%20sector>
  - 20 Nick Hillman, 'Where is the diversity? There are far fewer registered higher education providers than expected – so how is levelling up meant to happen?', HEPI Blog, 14 March 2022 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/03/14/where-is-the-diversity-there-are-far-fewer-registered-higher-education-providers-than-expected-so-how-is-levelling-up-meant-to-happen/>
  - 21 Department for Education, *Memorandum to the Education Select Committee: Post-legislative scrutiny of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, December 2022, paragraph 29 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1124476/Post-legislative\\_scrutiny\\_of\\_the\\_Higher\\_Education\\_and\\_Research\\_Act\\_2017\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1124476/Post-legislative_scrutiny_of_the_Higher_Education_and_Research_Act_2017_web_version.pdf)
  - 22 James Tooley and Jo Harris, 'Shortened medical degrees: a threat to quality?', HEPI blog, 11 September 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/09/11/shortened-medical-degrees-a-threat-to-quality/>







## **Trustees**

Professor Dame Sally Mapstone (Chair)

Sir David Bell

Mary Curnock Cook CBE

Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow

Professor Dame Helen Wallace

## **Advisory Board**

Alison Allden OBE

Professor Sir Chris Husbands

Professor Carl Lygo

Professor Nick Pearce

Professor Iyiola Solanke

Professor David Sweeney CBE

## **President**

Bahram Bekhradnia

## **Director**

Nick Hillman

## **Partners**

Advance HE

Curio London

Elsevier

GatenbySanderson

iQ Student Accommodation

Jisc

Kaplan

Kortext

Lloyds Bank

Mills & Reeve LLP

QS Quacquarelli Symonds

Research England

Taylor & Francis

TechnologyOne

Times Higher Education

Unite Students

UPP Group Limited

**This HEPI Report includes two contrasting views on recent higher education policies and alternatives to the status quo.**

**In Part One, Roger Brown argues neoliberal policies have damaged English higher education in recent decades – and continue to do so. He says neoliberalism has many adverse effects, including ‘increased stratification, the commodification of learning and (for some groups) reduced participation’.**

**In Part Two, Nick Hillman questions if it actually makes sense to paint recent reforms as neoliberal and suggests a wholly different approach might not bring the benefits that many people expect to see. Furthermore, he argues that supply-side reform has not yet gone far enough.**

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

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

December 2023 ISBN 978-1-915744-11-1

Higher Education Policy Institute

99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX

[www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

Printed by BCQ, Buckingham

Typesetting: Steve Billington, [www.jarmanassociates.co.uk](http://www.jarmanassociates.co.uk)