



Higher Education Policy Institute

Five Decades: One Lens – A view from the rear stalls

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About the author

Dr John Cater was the longest serving university leader in the UK when he retired in early 2025 from his post as Vice-Chancellor of Edge Hill University. During his 30 years in charge, Edge Hill was transformed into a modern institution that has advanced further and faster in the national league tables than any other UK university. Awarded a Gold for Student Experience in the most recent Teaching Excellence Framework exercise, Edge Hill has invested over £350 million in the physical infrastructure of its award-winning north-west campus in line with John's vision to create a place where students can live, learn and belong.

Dr Cater's previous HEPI paper, *Whither Teacher Education and Training?* (HEPI Report 95), was published in April 2017.

1. 1885 to 1973

One person

Economic growth. A social security system. A National Health Service. Education to 14 for all.

And hope. It seemed commonplace then.

I was born in the early 1950s, at a time when meat, bread and butter were still rationed. My mother was the youngest of six, my father recovering from his second nervous breakdown.

Home was an eighteenth-century two-bed terrace, fronting Watling Street, rattled by lorries, blackened by smoke and shared with my Parkinson's-afflicted grandfather – my 50-something grandmother having died in the week my parents married.

Having barely survived bronchitis in my second winter, the local authority moved us to a 1920s council terrace, the first home I remember. There was no heat other than a coal fire, no source of hot water other than a stove, no indoor lavatory, a tin bath – and a long back garden full of chickens and the occasional fox. But there was hope, and we had belief that things would get better.

At eight, I acquired my first Saturday cleaning job, at 10 I had two paper rounds and sold soap door-to-door. With my poor father hospitalised again, I was farmed out to an aunt, only returning home for one day, at a headteacher's insistence, to take the 11-plus. Selection at 11 failed my two sisters and my brother, but it may have saved me.

The only kid from the council estate, at grammar school, I rebelled. For two years I was placed on Daily Report, having to gain the teachers' signature, confirming satisfactory attitude and behaviour, for every lesson I attended. Then I grew up. Sport helped; I wanted to be part of the team. But so did an exceptional teacher, someone who changed lives and created life chances. I can still picture my late mother opening my GCE O-Level results envelope, bursting into tears, saying that I would never have to work in a factory – though, in some form of penance, I spent the following two summers labouring in the local iron foundry.

One institution

In 1971, even among those who had survived the mass exodus via Fifth Remove, only a handful of my peers went to university. I did not expect to go either. The only profession I knew of was teaching, so I hitch-hiked to Culham College, near Abingdon, and, already armed with sufficient GCEs, asked if they would take me in. They agreed, but I followed Groucho Marx's advice, and, for university, headed west to the smallest institution I could find for undergraduate education, Lampeter in mid-Wales, joining its first cohort of just 16 geographers.

That said, Culham fulfilled a purpose, convincing me that I could study beyond the age of 18 and was a religious version of the institution I joined eight years later, my first permanent lecturing post, at one of the 170 teacher training colleges tied to its church or its local authority.

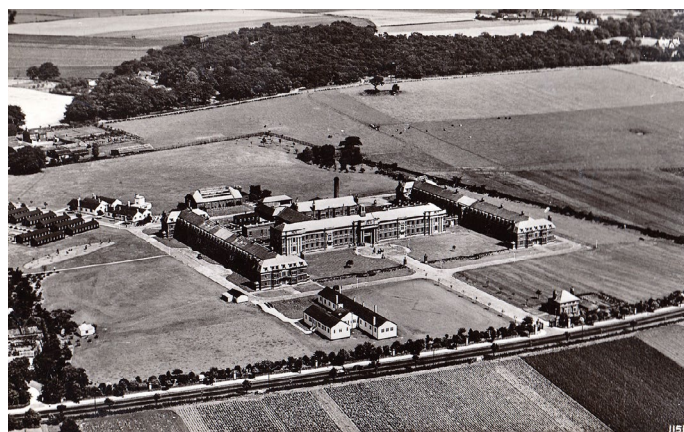
Edge Hill Training College was conceived at the celebration to mark the successful opening of the University of Liverpool in 1882 and birthed three years later, though the title of the new creation – the Liverpool Undenominational College – did not survive the opening ceremony, the Secretary of the Board of Education being ‘unprepared to sanction such an ungodly name’.



Despite opening with just 41 students and being named after a local street sign, Edge Hill prospered. By 1892 it was one of only two providers offering an honours degree in teaching, the other being Cambridge, though, shamefully, the latter did not allow women to fully matriculate until 1948. It also developed a reputation for radicalism, taking the colours of the suffragette movement and then replacing the white (for purity) with gold (for enlightenment). The suffragette and partner of the first Labour Chancellor, Ethel Annakin, was an Edge Hill graduate, one of many pioneers to make her mark.



But the First World War and the ensuing downturn took its toll on private subscriptions and the physical fabric of the inner city college and, in 1925, facing insolvency, the benefactors enthusiastically handed the institution to the County Palatine, who proceeded to construct a new campus at the end of the ‘Northern Line’ (of Merseyrail) – a college in a small market town few knew, named after a street sign now 13 miles away.



Closure threat number two came with the Second World War, the requisition of the site for a military hospital and wholesale relocation into a room-share with Bingley Training College on the other side of the Pennines.

But there was a far greater price paid by those who remained. The original college in Liverpool continued to be used as a secondary school, the promised demolition of the site never having come to pass, until, on 28 November 1940, the building, being used as an air raid shelter, was struck by a Luftwaffe bomb, taking the lives of over 150 women and children in one of the greatest single domestic tragedies of the War.

It was a small and vulnerable institution, shaken and saddened, that reversed across the Pennines, segueing into a decade of post-war struggle, forcing the Local Authority to seek a solution. Admit men. But weak brand identity sullied a good reputation (where known), and small and vulnerable Edge Hill remained.

Then the state intervened.

One sector?

In 1964, the Honours Board listed County Major Award Holders, who were the handful who had progressed from small-town grammar school to university. Over 10 years, a grand total of two had made it to Oxbridge and perhaps four or five each September to a ‘red brick’.

But reform was coming. Gazing at that Board, few 11-year-olds would have known that Lord Robbins had reported the previous October. The late 1940s and 1950s had seen the second wave of civics – Nottingham, Southampton, Hull, Exeter, Leicester – but, driven by the Robbins vision and a modernising Government, the 1960s saw the number of universities double to 45, the new builds (Michael Beloff’s ‘plateglass’ universities of East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York) and the upgraded Colleges of Advanced Technology – in England, Aston, Bath, Bradford, Brunel, City, Keele, Loughborough, Newcastle, Salford and Surrey.

In major towns and cities, another force was emerging. The colleges of art, business, commerce and

engineering, many with histories dating back to the early nineteenth century but now under local authority control, began to coalesce into meaningful units, future polytechnics, with ambitions broader than their roots. The establishment of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in 1965 facilitated the award of 'polytechnic-owned' degrees and the growth of an 'alternative' higher education sector, paving the way for Education Acts of 1988 and 1992, freedom from local authority control and a path towards university status.

But what of the teacher trainers? The 1970 Committee of Enquiry into the Training of Teachers, published as the James Report two years later, was the catalyst for dramatic change. Teacher education was to be planned regionally and nationally, no longer left to bishops and councillors. And teachers were to be trained in universities. Of 170 teacher training colleges, barely 30 would remain as independent entities.

One institution

Even after Edge Hill's migration north, Liverpool had eight teacher training colleges, representing Anglican and Catholic faiths, those of an ecumenical persuasion, mature students and specific subject specialisms (Sport, 'Domestic Science'), while Lancashire had three. Some merged into larger entities, (CF Mott, IM Marsh, FL Calder and Ethel Wormald all became part of Liverpool Polytechnic), others simply disappeared (in Lancashire, Poulton-Le-Fylde and, in time, Chorley) and a few survived, often thanks to the Church (in Liverpool, St. Katharine's, Christ's and Notre Dame merged, eventually becoming Liverpool Hope).

In Lancashire, there was no bishop to argue the case in the House of Lords but there was a Secretary of State. Edge Hill's Principal, Ken Millins, the first male postholder in 85 years, persuaded Shirley Williams to visit, the day ending with her stating that 'this College will not close on my watch'. But it also meant that the College had to diversify away from its teacher education roots, and quickly. An accreditation partner was needed, and in 1973 the newly emergent Lancaster University stepped into the breach. New degrees in the Humanities and Social Sciences were validated, and new staff appointed.

2. 1973 to 1988

One person

On graduating, I managed three days in an accountancy office and a summer in a bank before spotting a research assistanceship in Liverpool. The only Geography PhD registrant in the department, this morphed into a temporary lecturing post, then a research fellowship. But time-limited and grant dependent, I needed a permanent job. Seventy applications, all individually typed, and, after months of failure, three interviews in one week. I took the first offer – a policy unit in London. I

then discovered that working in government either side of the 1979 General Election was not for me. So, I took the third job too.

One sector?

A largely benign climate for higher education in the Labour years of 1974 to 1979 meant that many in the sector appeared oblivious to, or felt immune from, the increasing fiscal challenges facing the state, even after the then Prime Minister's pleas to the International Monetary Fund, approaching the 1980s seemingly expecting a decade of consolidation, steady growth, relatively secure predictability and continued autonomy. Then the election came. Universities' freedoms were suddenly under threat, and the sector, largely complacent, was poorly placed to respond to a different political imperative.

An enlarged university sector had an enlarged cost, and the Thatcher Government was increasingly sceptical of the value gained by the state at a time when public sector budgets were placed under significant pressure. Building on the control exerted on Teacher Training Colleges under (and after) the Heath administration, the Government showed increased enthusiasm for reining back the sector, with the University Grants Commission expressing concern of a possible 5% (or 'even worse') cut in higher education funding.

When the White Paper arrived in March 1981, the Council of Vice-Chancellors and Principals were nervous that this cut could increase three-fold, and by July 1981, when the letter arrived, a 15% reduction in overall funding was indeed to be applied. This cut was not spread equally by the Universities Grants Committee; some institutions received a high degree of protection, while – in a decision that seemed unfair even at the time but which looks perverse now – those new universities that had emerged from a technological background, such as Salford (-44%), Aston (-31%) and Stirling (-27%), were targeted, almost to the point that, at least in one instance, their very existence was threatened.

One institution

Given this budgetary context, it was not surprising that local authorities, particularly those with Conservative administrations, would look again at the institutions in their charge.

Having sidestepped the bullet in the mid-1970s, the early 1980s brought a new existential threat, when the County Council decided, *nem con*, that Edge Hill College should indeed close and be merged into the recently renamed Lancashire (as opposed to Preston) Polytechnic. Battle lines were drawn, economic impact studies undertaken, politicians lobbied, threats made, and, in time, closure was forced into the 'too difficult' box. The Council withdrew its proposal.

3. 1988 to 1992

One person

Looking back to my late 20s, I think this is the time I realised, whether I wished it or not, that I might not always be a Geography lecturer. I played only a small role in the battle for survival but, data-rational and driven, I helped marshal some of the social and economic arguments against closure. In doing so, in one very small pond, I suspect I became a known-known.

One institution

Victories, especially when over-celebrated, breed complacency.

Saved, Edge Hill did not develop a new degree programme for 12 years, partly because any proposal required the approval of a Regional Advisory Council. (I can recall visiting their Edwardian terrace in Rochdale to argue the case unsuccessfully.) It was also partly because the local authority exerted a level of control and did not wish to see the institution diversify. In fairness, it was also partly because many staff did not wish to see the institution as anything other than a well-regarded Teacher Training College.

And it was not just the lack of curriculum development. Starved of capital and starved of ambition, Edge Hill also did not construct a single building between 1971 and 1994, placing a fourth existential threat on the horizon.

One sector?

While universities suffered (albeit differentially), the second higher education 'sector' continued to strengthen its foothold in local and regional markets, in vocational subjects, among those whom, traditionally, would not have considered university and, equally, among those whom universities would not have considered recruiting. The ability to grant awards, following the founding of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), enabled rapidly developing institutions to shift from dependence on external partners – my first year of lecturing in a polytechnic was spent preparing finalists for London External BA (General) and BSc (Econ.) awards – to academic maturity, national accreditation and then full degree-awarding autonomy.

This progression, accompanied by some heavy lobbying, led to the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts. The former removed the polytechnics and some of the larger colleges of higher education from local authority control, while the 1992 Act enabled those polytechnics and CNAA-accredited higher education colleges with over 4,000 full-time equivalent students, of whom at least 3,000 had to be following programmes of degree-level study, to attain University Title.

One institution

One institution's opportunity is another institution's threat. In 1991/92 Edge Hill College of Higher Education met the criteria for the number of students following degree-level study, but fell short on the required total number of students to meet the minimum threshold to apply for University Title (by almost 200 full-time equivalents). More importantly, the institution lacked academic maturity, having relied on Lancaster University as its validating partner for key aspects of its quality assurance. Furthermore, its financial and operational security was open to question in a market where the number of institutions with university status had recently burgeoned.

4. 1992 to 2001

One person

By 1992, despite a marked absence of ambition and a singular lack of job applications, I had been fortunate enough to be asked to progress from Head of Department to Associate Dean to Acting Dean to Director of Policy and Planning and then to Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

Though arguably blameless, the then Director and Chief Executive, Ruth Gee, felt the consequences of a lack of university status, a weak Ofsted outcome across the diversified provision and increasing financial pressures in a competitive environment. The Governing Body felt that the youngest and newest of the senior post holders could not apply for the role, and I agreed. But they also needed an individual to take an interim responsibility while the selection process proceeded.

The role of Director and Chief Executive was an unattractive post in an institution with a questionable future and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no appointment was made on first iteration, nor on second iteration. In time, by osmosis, the placeholder inherited the post.

One sector?

Forty-plus years on and the terms 'pre-92' and 'post-92' university are still in common parlance, but in 1992 there was a third sub-set, those 51 higher education providers that had over 300 students on degree programmes but had failed to clear the hurdles required for university status: the teacher trainers; the specialist colleges; and the conservatoires. Representing fewer than one-twentieth of English higher education students, they were, implicitly at least, expected to 'disappear' or to merge: Westhill headed into Birmingham; Westminster into Oxford Brookes; Winchester College of Art to Southampton (not, interestingly, into Winchester, 'King Alf's' having been too small to apply for University Title); while, in Southampton, La Sainte Union closed.

A report was commissioned by the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP), and Charles Clarke, not yet in

Parliament, wrote *The Case for University Colleges*, but to an unsympathetic audience. Of the 51 institutions listed, almost exactly half had either ceased to exist or changed their designation and status less than a decade later.

In 1992, if you had the basic requirements in place, it was almost impossible not to become a university; by the mid-1990s, under political direction and John Randall's leadership of the Quality Assurance Agency, it was almost impossible to become a university.

One institution

Applying for Degree-Awarding Powers in the mid / late 1990s, an essential precursor to any attempt to attain University Title, was a tortuous process, and it was deliberately intended to be. Over 30 new universities had been created by Act of Parliament early in the decade, and there was no popular desire to create more. Edge Hill, shorn of the possibility of using a 'University College' label following the rejection of the recommendation in Charles Clarke's report, submitted an application for Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP) in 1997, and suffered the predictable response. In hindsight, the Quality Assurance Agency's judgment was correct, given the institution's immaturity: it was an institution only recently independent of local authority control with emergent systems and historic financial challenges.

The rejection in 2001 was harder to accept. Recruitment was increasingly healthy, the financial challenges more remote, the curriculum more diversified, systems and structures copper-plated. But even four years in to a more empathetic Government, the policy environment remained challenging.

5. 2001 to 2006

One person

Within a year of taking up the Director and Chief Executive's role, too slow in taking a step back, I found myself chairing the Standing Conference of Principals' Teacher Education Group, with which came membership of the SCoP Board. By 1999, I found myself in the Vice-Chair's seat and, two years later, I had the honour of chairing the representative body of 'non-university' higher education institutions. And at the same time, I was appointed to the Board of a key Non-Departmental Public Body, the Teacher Training Agency, in time gaining valuable insights as Chair of its Accreditation Committee and, for a year, the Audit Committee. Poacher turned gamekeeper, I also found myself on the Quality Assurance Agency's Advisory Committee for Degree-Awarding Powers.

One sector?

While only one-twentieth of higher education sat with the Colleges of Higher Education, the colleges accounted

for almost half of all teacher training, particularly at undergraduate level (as opposed to PGCE) and in the supply of qualified professionals for the primary and early years of schooling. The Colleges had also acquired a larger than proportional share of education for the health professions, following Project 2000 and the closure of NHS Schools of Nursing and Midwifery. The percentage contribution to the creative industries was equally substantial, with globally recognised specialist providers left sitting outside the university sector. With an increasingly receptive Government, the lobbying intensified.

One institution

By 2003, the Colleges of Higher Education were obtaining Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP), and Edge Hill joined the back of that queue, frustrated by prior refusals though a stronger institution because of them. But the Colleges, even those with TDAP, several of which were now beyond the student number threshold imposed in 1992, still lacked a route to University Title.

One sector?

The 2003 White Paper gave the colleges hope. Higher education providers were encouraged to focus on one or two of four key themes – Teaching, Research, Knowledge Transfer and Widening Participation – with an intent (never realised) to treat each mission as having parity of esteem.

As outgoing and incoming Chair, Dianne Willcocks and I, alongside colleagues such as Patricia Ambrose and Roger Brown, lobbied hard for parity of esteem for Colleges too, finding the Secretary of State (by happy coincidence Charles Clarke), the Minister for Higher Education (Alan Johnson) and at least some civil servants not unreceptive. I can still recall being called down to the Secretary of State's office early in the summer of 2004 and asked, unprepared, how I would justify an argument that colleges should (or should not) be granted a route towards University Title.

As we left the room, we were advised to listen to the answer to a Parliamentary question at approximately 16:45 that Thursday evening, probably the only time I have truly felt close to the decision-taking process. When Alan Johnson stood up and answered Alan Whitehead's question, we knew that the University of Chester or Chichester or Worcester or Winchester was a realisable aspiration, so much so that we almost overlooked the fact that this was the legislation that would pave the way for the £3,000 tuition fee ...

One institution

There were still bridges to cross. Rightly, the Minister decided that, unlike the polytechnics in 1992, there would be no automatic transfer of the larger Colleges of Higher Education to University Title. Rather, each institution would have to enter a scrutiny process,

obtain Taught Degree Awarding Powers (if they had not already done so) and then make a successful application to the Privy Council.

Edge Hill College of Higher Education became Edge Hill University on 9 May 2006, not entirely through choice, as my attempts to persuade the Privy Council of the merits of a more explicit regional identity fell on stony ground and the proffered alternative, the University of Ormskirk, sounded like a denial of our history and reminiscent of a sub-par Uttoxeter from a Laurie Taylor sketch.

But if the post-2004 universities sought true parity of esteem, then the absence of the power to grant research degrees had to be confronted. Edge Hill University gained Research Degree Awarding Powers (RDAP) in 2008, the second of the cohort to do so.

Though I expected and saw only incremental progress, year-on-year, starting from a position at the very bottom of the league tables, others began to notice a step change. Diversification and University Title saw applicant numbers quadruple, and Edge Hill received its first shortlisting as University of the Year from *Times Higher Education* in 2007, repeated in 2010 and 2011 before becoming the first 'new new' university to receive the title three years later.

One of the challenges Edge Hill faced was its inability to develop the campus. Initially this was a financial issue, partly resolved by appointing our bank's regional lead to the Board of Governors and demonstrating our ability to both grow and generate surpluses for investment – even if Barclays loaned the University money at top-of-the-market rates. But there was also a land issue, the University being surrounded by conservation areas to the north and south, housing to the west and green belt to the east.

Every major planning application was turned down, including at public inquiry, until eventually the Secretary of State was persuaded to look again. In the intervening period, optimistic and far from risk adverse, we negotiated the purchase of 80 acres of green belt land from Lord Derby's Estate (at a price above agricultural land prices but well short of speculative development value). In time, this enabled the University to move its sports fields east and develop a Western Campus around a sustainable urban drainage system (also known as a lake...).

Continually generating surpluses and reinvesting, a second lake and the Eastern Campus followed, transforming Edge Hill from a 'commute to study' university with 500 residential students in increasingly unsatisfactory accommodation to a home for 2,600 undergraduates in sector-leading housing.



6. 2006 to 2023

One sector?

University Title, buoyant demand and improvements in our league table position helped Edge Hill progress in the run up to 2012, notwithstanding the fiscal crisis and the student number controls put in place in the autumn of 2008.

While the introduction of the £9,000 fee may have slowed demand marginally for one year, the additional resource it generated, in a growing institution, allowed a further acceleration of investment in teaching and learning facilities. In 20 years, Edge Hill invested almost £300 million while taking on just £40 million of debt finance.

But there was also a sense that the sector had, to a degree, outflanked the state. The original expectation that institutions – and certainly those outside the perceptual elite – would, for the most part, charge tuition fees much less than the maximum £9,000 quickly proved false, with only 28 universities not charging the maximum in the first year of implementation and every institution falling into line within two years.

The price of this fleet-footedness was to be borne in the years ahead in the form of a static fee and a measure of antipathy or hostility in markets, media and politics. But £9,000 for each full-time undergraduate insulated institutions from the Coalition's cuts. Factor in low inflation, combined with relatively buoyant market demand, and – for most universities – the early years of the millennium's second decade felt financially secure.

Although increased flexibility around University Title raised the number of providers in the sector, with smaller, specialist and private institutions becoming eligible for Degree Awarding Powers and University Title, many universities were able to further secure their position by taking advantage of the lifting of the student number cap in 2015. Initially institutions from across the spectrum of the sector benefitted, whether high, medium or low tariff, but, for many, these benefits were short lived. Elite institutions – with numbers progressing to Russell Group institutions

appearing in schools' performance measures – became far more proactive players in the undergraduate market, increasing recruitment, particularly to (less expensive-to-deliver) classroom-based subjects. Consequently, as market demand started to flatten, recruitment became progressively more challenging, initially for low-tariff institutions, then mid-tariff providers, then, more recently, for almost all outside (and even some within) that perceptual elite.

One institution

Could an institution called Edge Hill, in a place called Ormskirk, continue to generate 23,000 applications every year? No. Having spent a decade as 'a tick on the sheep's back', recruiting students who perhaps did not quite have the grades to go to Lancaster, Liverpool or Manchester, the pool started to dry up. At undergraduate level, UCAS applicants drifted down from 18,000 to three-quarters of that as we moved into the early years of the current decade.

COVID added a degree of buoyancy to the applicant market in 2020 and, to a lesser extent, 2021, but for a University generating eight-figure sums from owning all of its own residential and catering estate, the loss of income was significant and not materially helped by furlough payments. But a demand problem was also surfacing.



Edge Hill is often regarded as a 'public sector university', with £22 million of tuition fee income from teacher training and £40 million from its Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine. But the decision to remove bursary payments from those training to join the NHS, combined with the realities of nursing during the pandemic, saw applicant demand fall by a third. In parallel, applications to train to teach, another 'present in person' profession, fell by 25%, while numbers across the diversified provision were no better than static, despite the University now offering honours degrees in all 14 of the largest A-Level entry subjects.

Adjacent to some of the poorest boroughs in England (Knowsley, Bootle and north Liverpool) and sub-regional in eight-tenths of its recruitment, the changes to student funding introduced in 2022 hardly helped

either, with those in the mid- to lower-income bands – the teachers, nurses, social workers – paying back their student loans from a lower threshold and for a decade longer, while the highest earners now clear their debt expeditiously.

That said, the University continued to invest, not only in the curriculum, but also in the physical fabric, the 1950s core being demolished in 2024 to create a new Science facility, a new Students' Union and a further 250 residential rooms in a 'Central Campus'. I suspect that investing a further £56 million in new build is, not, however, something that will be repeated in the immediate term.

One sector?

Whither higher education? While there is a lot of justified 'noise' around projected deficits and institutional futures, the real challenges are only now emerging. With every passing week, the state of the economy looks increasingly parlous; and, while the mood music from an incoming Government may have sounded sweeter, no one is dancing. In a priority sequence, health, social care, defence, all outflank education. And across education, it is hard to mount a compelling case for higher education to be prioritised over nursery provision or the early years of schooling or further education or any area where the state has a statutory obligation.

Market demand from home applicants is also broadly static, declining among mature cohorts. International recruitment, with enhanced fees, seen as a saviour by (too?) many has come up against the cliff edge of perceived public attitudes towards even temporary in-migration, and the withdrawal of the dependants' visa for taught postgraduates. Factor in double-digit inflation post-COVID, the reduced tuition fee for many Foundation Year programmes, and the continued debate around the demand for, and the costs and bureaucracy of apprenticeship provision, together with threats to de-fund programmes offered at Level 7, and the challenges quickly add up.

But if universities are not able to shore up student numbers in the 2020s, they will be ill-prepared for the decade that follows. An age cohort that declines by 14% in seven years, with no signs of a liberalisation of migration policy, could well see a significant decline in undergraduate and postgraduate numbers with no obvious alternative source of significant teaching income. Add in the accelerating costs of necessary investment in student health and wellbeing, and in teaching and learning and operational technology, and a perfect storm is brewing.

As many others have commented, the binary approach to the national budget – invest in the NHS, penalise employers through an increase in the National Insurance rate – more than wipes out any benefit from the increase

in the maximum undergraduate fee to £9,535, and the lost opportunity to announce a link of the fee to inflation for the life of the Parliament removes from universities the ability to plan, to invest in people, equipment and infrastructure, to support economic growth and to develop and play in full their role as anchor institutions.

I have written elsewhere of a trifurcated sector, of three 'sectors', consisting of: a perceptual elite providing three-year, full-time, residential higher education to those able to afford it; anchor institutions in the cities and large towns, linked into business and industry, partnering with further education, predominantly serving their sub-region; and, global providers increasingly taking control of online learning and most worryingly, potentially creating their own version of 'truth'.

Conclusion

One institution

It has been an interesting journey. Edge Hill has travelled a significant distance in a short time. Faced with threats to its very existence, it has proved adaptable and resilient. It provides the public sector with thousands of graduates in Medicine, Teaching, Nursing and Health Care, Social Work and Social Care every year, while sustaining market demand for what is now a fully-diversified portfolio. It has a sector-leading estate, limited debt and the ownership of over 2,500 'homes'.

That said, it has, and will continue to have, its challenges. A small market town often struggles to be a destination of choice for many in their late teens, Edge Hill being, infamously but not inaccurately, described two decades ago as 'a university no one has heard of in a town no one has been to' – in fact, in travel-time-distance, it is the nearest university for 1.25 million people, within touching distance of Liverpool and the coast, and 40 minutes from the North-West's other iconic city.



Given this, in the trifurcated scenario above, there is more work to do; Edge Hill needs to re-establish and reinforce its historic reputation as a provider of high-quality learning and teaching and build on its award-winning recognition for outstanding retention and student support.

There is also a role for the state. If the Government effectively tackles the recruitment and retention challenges blighting the public sector, making those professions attractive once again, institutions like Edge Hill will benefit proportionally.

Finally, as intimated above, Edge Hill's biggest problem is its relative anonymity. The University still needs a much stronger and more widely owned and accepted brand and a more broadly based reputation if it is to sustain market demand, grow and face forwards with certainty.

One person

I have been incredibly fortunate, a 'Boomer', part of that lucky generation, alongside some born early in Gen X, to have opportunities denied to those who preceded me: economic growth; a National Health Service; a social security system, increasing educational opportunities distributed more widely.

There has been no greater privilege than having a career in education. And being a vice-chancellor is perhaps the greatest privilege of all. The great honour of seeing thousands of students graduate at almost 300 ceremonies – even if this has been retribution for not attending either of my own.

In the end, a vice-chancellor's job is either incredibly complex – even in a mid-sized institution with 15,000 students, 2,500 homes, 2,000 jobs, 1,500 stakeholders, 15 retail and service outlets, three sites, two theatres, one cinema, 160 acres and an estate worth half a billion pounds – or a very simple job: recruit, retain, offer an outstanding learning and living experience, help graduates attain the outcomes they aspire to, maintain financial and business integrity and recognise that all of this can only be achieved by and with your colleagues, your stakeholders and your community.

Educators change lives and create life chances, as they have mine.



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